Life and the Symbolic in the Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer

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Abstract

Life and the Symbolic in the Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer

Craig Leroux

Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms has met with a wide range of reactions from his readers, often drawing the criticism that it remains within the rubric of a neo-Kantian intellectualism. Specifically, Heidegger criticized Cassirer for not recognizing the finite and embodied nature of humanity. The present thesis argues that Cassirer holds a view of humanity as essentially finite, embodied, and temporal. Further, it argues that humanity's power for self-development stems directly from its limited, yet open, character. The first chapter demonstrates that Cassirer advances a conception of human life as defined by the symbolic, and a conception of the symbolic that is rooted in human embodied life. The second chapter presents Cassirer's critique of the traditional theories of perception and then argues that his notion of symbolic pregnance is key to understanding both his theory of perception and the power for humanity to symbolically construct its cultural world. The third chapter returns to Cassirer's conception of life, showing that only in virtue of our embodiment is life able to actualize itself, construct its cultural world, and advance into the realm of Spirit.

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List of Abbreviations

Frequently cited works have been identified by the following abbreviations:

EM	Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*
PSF v.1	Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Volume 1: Language*
PSF v.2	Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Volume 2: Mythical Thinking*
PSF v.3	Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Volume 3: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*
PSF v.4	Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Volume 4: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*
SF	Cassirer, *Substance and Function*

Introduction

As is often noted, Ernst Cassirer was a formidable figure in inter-war German philosophy, yet for decades his work was neither widely taught nor studied. Despite this lack of recognition from the academy, "the presence of Cassirer can nevertheless be established, as it were, in the "margins" and "between the lines" of a number of key figures in contemporary thought."[1] Cassirer certainly had an important influence on the work of a number of Twentieth Century philosophers, not the least of whom are Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jürgen Habermas. However, until recently scholarship on Cassirer—both in English and in German—had been relatively sparse. Moreover, what had been published often failed to consider Cassirer's philosophy on its own terms and to thereby do justice to the original and significant contributions in his work. Many early commentators (as well as some writing today) simply assumed that since Cassirer's development took place within the Marburg school, that his philosophy adhered to a strictly neo-Kantian program. This misinterpretation was undoubtedly aided by the fact of Cassirer's frequent use of terminology loaded with Kantian connotations. But as John Michael Krois notes, while the language in which Cassirer writes remains thoroughly Kantian, his philosophy does not. In recent years, encouraged by the 1987 publication of Krois's watershed work *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History*, as well as the 1996 posthumous publication of Cassirer's manuscript for *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 4: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer scholarship has begun to enjoy a renaissance. Articles and books on Cassirer are appearing with ever greater frequency, as are the convening of conferences and colloquia. Following Krois, scholars studying Cassirer have, for the most part, taken a turn toward reading and judging Cassirer's

[1] Lofts, S.G., *Ernst Cassirer: A "Repetition" of Modernity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 1.

philosophy based on its own merits, seeing it as more than simply another iteration of Marburg neo-Kantianism. It is in that spirit of treating Cassirer as a significant and original philosopher that this thesis is written. Its project centers around the issue of Cassirer's conception of the human subject.

One of Cassirer's earliest yet most enduring critics—certainly the one who looms largest today—was Martin Heidegger. In March of 1929 Cassirer and Heidegger met for their famed debate at Davos. While the topic was ostensibly their respective interpretations of Kant, the written protocol of the debate demonstrates that the dialogue was quite far reaching and included topics like finitude and infinitude, truth, and freedom. In the course of the debate Heidegger invoked a distinction, often used by Cassirer, to compare their respective philosophies—the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem*. Cassirer had raised the distinction himself earlier in the debate with reference to Kant, asserting that Heidegger had mistaken Kant's schematism for his *terminus ad quem*, when in fact it was Kant's *terminus a quo*. Heidegger asserted that Cassirer's own *terminus ad quem* is the multitude of the symbolic forms, but calls into question the clarity of Cassirer's *terminus a quo*.

> In the first lecture, Cassirer used the expressions *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem*. One could say that for Cassirer the *terminus ad quem* is the whole of a philosophy of culture in the sense of an elucidation of the wholeness of the forms of the shaping consciousness. For Cassirer, the *terminus a quo* is utterly problematical…Cassirer's point is to emphasize the various forms of the shaping in order, with a view to these shapings, subsequently to point out a certain dimension of the shaping powers themselves.[2]

In respect of his own philosophy, Heidegger maintains that the *terminus a quo* is what he clearly develops—the meaning of Being for Dasein—and then goes on to ask whether his own *terminus ad quem* is also clear.

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[2] Gordon p. 191.

> My position is the reverse: The *terminus a quo* is my central problematic, the one I develop. The question is: is the *terminus ad quem* as clear for me? For me, this occurs not in the whole of a Philosophy of Culture, but rather in the question *ti to on*; or rather; what in general is called Being? For me, it was from this question that the problematic of a metaphysics of Dasein arose in order to derive a ground for the basic problem of metaphysics.[3]

Heidegger presents his *terminus a quo*, the question of the meaning of Being for Dasein, as arising in the course of considering what would be required to address the question of what Being itself is. He thus suggests that Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, which does not begin from a detailed analytic of Dasein, is therefore insufficiently grounded. Heiedgger also levels this criticism in his review of the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. While Heidegger acknowledges the great benefit that Cassirer's studies may prove to be for the positive science of myth, he questions whether the philosophical significance of the work can be understood in the absence of a detailed analytic of Dasein. Heidegger writes, "The interpretation of the essence of myth as a possibility of human Dasein remains accidental and directionless as long as it is not founded on a radical ontology of Dasein in the light of the problem of Being in general."[4] The thrust of Heidegger's criticism is that without a proper investigation into the constitution of Dasein, we cannot securely ground Cassirer's analysis of myth—or any other symbolic form—as a properly philosophical investigation. To be sure, Cassirer does not undertake such an analysis in an explicit way within the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. But it would be a mistake to assume that Cassirer's philosophy is not founded upon a conception of the nature of the human subject.

To begin, we should ask whether such a preparatory analytic—of the nature suggested by Heidegger—is methodologically required by Cassirer or whether it is

[3] Gordon p. 191.
[4] Heidegger, *Review of Ernst Cassirer's Mythical Thought*, p. 41.

methodologically excluded from Cassirer's philosophy. For Cassirer, the task of providing a positive account of subject is a metaphysical task. However, as early as *Substance and Function*, Cassirer established his view that metaphysics makes distinctions out of what are otherwise essentially unities. "The characteristic procedure of metaphysics does not consist in transcending the field of knowledge in general,—for beyond this field there would not be even material for a possible question,—but in separating correlate standpoints within the field of knowledge itself, and thus transforming what is logically correlative into an opposition of things." Common metaphysical distinctions like "subject" and "object," "inner" and "outer," are distinctions based on theoretical differences that we draw, rather than some observation of phenomenal reality itself. The act of drawing these distinctions typically results in the creation of two separate spheres between which no mediation can be accomplished. Once we posit, for example, the body and soul as two substantially different things, we are unable to re-join them in an essential unity. But for Cassirer, once these metaphysical distinctions are drawn, there is no hope of reuniting them. The unity of these oppositions lies prior to metaphysical thinking, it lies in the lived world. The methodological consequences of this are clear. If Cassirer is to properly engage in a phenomenological inquiry then he cannot import metaphysical distinctions into a terminus a quo from the beginning, because it will have the effect of colouring the entire investigation. Moreover, the human subject—consciousness—is not a thing that we can investigate by a merely reflective inquiry. Consciousness can only show itself to through its activity. This methodological implication can been seen even more clearly when we consider Cassirer's characterization of Natorp.

> We can never lay bare the immediate life and being of consciousness as such. But it is a significant task to seek a new aspect and meaning for the unhalting process of objectivization by exploring it in a twofold direction: from *terminus a quo* to *terminus ad quem* and back again. In Natorp's opinion, it is only by a continuous back and forth, by this twofold direction of method that the object of psychology can be made visible as such.[5]

Thus for Cassirer the process of making consciousness visible is one which requires both a phenomenological analysis of its constructive efforts and actions, and then a corresponding "reconstruction" of the conditions of the possibility of those constructions. As Crowe notes, "This implies that a turn back to the factical, to the realm of the constituted in it's [*sic*] factical and historical multiplicity, provides a critical check on the success of the initial transcendental turn from the constituted to the constituting."[6]

For Cassirer the human subject is not a fixed entity. It both constructs its world and itself. Therefore an investigation of the human subject is intimately linked with the investigation into what it creates. The philosophy of symbolic forms, in tracing the forms of myth, language, and theoretical knowledge is at once an investigation into the products and the constitution of consciousness—both actively develop throughout the investigation. In an important sense, it is therefore only at the end of the investigation that it is possible to summarize the results for the existential constitution of the subject. However, Cassirer never did return to an explicit analysis of the nature of the human subject. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that such a conception of human nature was altogether lacking from Cassirer's philosophy. It is therefore the subject of this thesis to show that throughout the *Philosophy of the Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer holds a conception of human life as being permeated by the symbolic, whose embodiment represents both limitation and the possibility for exceeding those limitations. It should be

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[5] PSF 3 p. 53.
[6] Crowe, "Between Termini", p. 100.

noted that this is exactly the conception of human being which Heidegger asserts is not recognized by Cassirer. Heidegger argues:

> I believe that what I describe by Dasein does not allow translation into a concept of Cassirer's. Should one say consciousness, that is precisely what I rejected. What I call Dasein is essentially codetermined—not just through what we describe as spirit, and not just through what we call living. Rather, it depends on the original unity and the immanent structure of the relatedness of a human being, which to a certain extent has been fettered in a body and which, in the fetteredness in the body, stands in a particular condition of being bound up with beings. In the midst of this it finds itself, not in the sense of a spirit that gazes down upon it, but rather in the sense that Dasein, thrown into the midst of beings, carries out as free an incursion into entities, an incursion that is always historical and, in the ultimate sense, contingent.[7]

In opposition to Heidegger's assessment of Cassirer's philosophy, I will show that Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms entails a conception of the human subject as being an essential unity whose embodiment and historical temporality are the conditions for the possibility of meaning and action. Specifically, in the first chapter we will show that Cassirer's conception of the symbolic is closely bound up with his conception of life, so much so that the model he employs for the symbolic is the relationship between body and soul. In the second chapter we will turn to Cassirer's theory of perception as founded upon his notion of symbolic pregnance. We will first show how he rejects the traditional theories of perception because they fail to account for the simultaneity of the material and intellectual factors of perception. We will then go on to show how his conception of symbolic pregnance allows for such simultaneity, and further that meaningful perceptive experience is possible only by virtue of our temporality. Finally, in the third chapter we shall consider Cassirer's metaphysics of life and spirit, showing that he does not hold to a view of humanity as existing primarily in an "infinite realm", but rather that we are fundamentally tied to our finite bodies and conditioned by them.

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[7] Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 194-195.

Chapter 1: Life and the Symbol

The concept of life and the concept of the symbol are closely related in Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. In this chapter I aim to show how Cassirer conceives of human life as being thoroughly symbolic and how, in turn, he conceives of the symbolic function as rooted in the phenomenon of life. In the first section I begin by providing context for Cassirer's symbolic shift, outlining how his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* emerges as a response both to Kant and to the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism. I then show how his focus on the symbol applies not only to the various products of human culture, but equally that it involves a rethinking of the character of human life. In the second section I further investigate Cassirer's notion of the symbolic, showing that it encompasses not only cultural products, but also human consciousness as such. We will further see that Cassirer's model of symbolism takes its origin not from the phenomenon of language, as is typical for many philosophers, but rather from the phenomenon of life.

1.1 The Symbolic Character of Life

It is generally accepted that Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* marked a new direction in philosophy. Discontented with the dogmatic state of metaphysics and the proliferation of skepticism on multiple philosophical fronts, Kant effected a "Copernican revolution" to finally establish a firm footing for knowledge, specifically in the mode of mathematics and the natural sciences, and to demonstrate the possibility of valid, synthetic a priori propositions—tasks in which he found both rationalism and empiricism to have failed. This revolution saw Kant turn toward the subject, rather than the object, as conditioning the structure of our experience. By making the objects of our experience

conform to the subjective a priori conditions of that experience, he cast the knowing subject in an active role at the centre of knowledge—demonstrating that the subject contains within itself an autonomous reason that forms the basis of both natural and moral lawfulness. The Kantian subject, through its faculties of the understanding, sensibility, and imagination, is able to provide the basis upon which its experience of reality is spontaneously ordered, thus allowing reality to be both apprehensible and comprehensible. In other words, the transcendental ego is the condition for the possibility of any experience whatever.

The latter years of Kant's life, and the decades after his death, saw ever-increasing advances in the natural sciences and mathematics, as well as the emergence of the idealist philosophies of Fichte, Schelling an Hegel. As Skidelsky observes, "Since the time of Kant, philosophers had been struck by the contrast between the successful accumulation of natural scientific knowledge and the fruitless to and fro of metaphysical debate."[8] The rise of positivism in the latter half of the nineteenth century was due largely to opposition to idealism as well as the limitations that Kantian philosophy, with its ties to Newtonian physics, had placed on the scientific method. Positivist and materialist philosophies divested the natural sciences of any reliance on an externally derived logic or all-encompassing reason and, correspondingly, of any larger significance in the broader realm of human culture. It was chiefly in opposition to post-Kantian idealism and positivism that neo-Kantians took up the call to go "Back to Kant!" By no means a united front, the southwest school (which would prove a lasting influence on Heidegger), led by Heinrich Rickert and Wilhelm Windelband, rejected the natural sciences as the pinnacle

[8] Skidelsky, Edward. *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 9.

of reason and asserted history as the model of thought for understanding humanity. Their work contributed in large part to a broader revolt against the natural sciences and reason in general. Conversely, the Marburg school, led by Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, did not allow its critique of positivism to descend into an outright rejection of reason. Instead they reasserted reason as the pinnacle of human culture, demonstrating "that scientific rationality is only ever a particular specification of a more universal concept of reason, at work in all departments of culture."[9] They also sought to return to a Kantian model and to re-establish the knowing subject as an active force in the construction of knowledge—making the products of the scientific method not simply reproductions or copies of reality (as they are for the positivists), but the very constitution of its lawfulness.

It was within this context of Marburg neo-Kantianism that Ernst Cassirer's early philosophical development took place. To be sure, as a student of Cohen and Natorp, Cassirer's work was significantly influenced by them. Perhaps most importantly, Cassirer's philosophy takes very seriously the idea that the knowing subject plays an active role in structuring its experience of reality and in forming knowledge. Cassirer repeatedly argues against any form of a copy theory of knowledge, where what we know is simply a mere reproduction from the world of our experience. But while Cassirer's early philosophy was clearly grounded in Marburg neo-Kantianism, his mature philosophy represents a turn away from Marburg. Where Cohen saw the central task of philosophy to be the grounding of the rapidly advancing mathematical and natural sciences, Cassirer reversed directions making reason (in the mode of scientific, conceptual thinking) the end, not the beginning, of human creativity and knowledge. As

[9] Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer*, 25.

Skidelsky notes, this allowed Cassirer to incorporate a wider range of human experience into his philosophy:

> Only Cassirer—and here he did break with Marburg—no longer conceived the unity of culture as a unity of reason. He viewed the various forms of culture not as products of a universal faculty but as aspects of our symbolic self-expression. This revision enabled him to do justice, as the Marburg school could not, to the emotional, sensuous side of life…Cassirer could thus combat the accusation of "one-sided rationalism" frequently leveled against the Marburg school.[10]

It is this move toward the symbol and the symbolic that marks the most significant and transformative aspect of Cassirer's philosophy. But despite Cassirer's advances, many of his early commentators, as well as some writing today, interpret his philosophy as remaining within the framework of neo-Kantianism. This interpretation is likely aided by the fact that Cassirer never made a public break from Marburg—even asserting at the Davos debate with Heidegger that he did not see his own work as a "defection" from Cohen.[11] As Skidelsky notes, "…however sympathetic his motives, Cassirer's failure to make a clean break with his predecessors was strategically a disaster. It allowed his opponents to present him as a man of the past, a purveyor of obsolete ideas."[12]

But the central ideas of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms were far from obsolete. In fact they marked a significant and novel shift away from both the traditional Kantian and neo-Kantian projects. As Cassirer himself notes,[13] many of the key themes developed in the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* originated in his earlier work, *Substance and Function*. However, it is in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* where Cassirer broadens his project beyond the epistemology of the sciences and brings these themes to a more

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[10] Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer*, 49.
[11] cf. Gordon, Peter. *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 144.*
[12] Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer*, 49.
[13] cf. Cassirer, Ernst. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 1: Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), xiii. (Hereafter cited as PSFv1.)

complete elaboration. The most significant shift, as Skidelsky notes, consists in the central importance that Cassirer gives to the notion of the symbol:

> The basic principle of culture is no longer identified with reason, in its theoretical and ethical guises, but with the more inclusive notion of the symbol. This makes a crucial difference. The concept of symbolism, unlike that of reason, embraces all dimensions of human existence. The sensuous, emotive facets of life are no longer pathological in Kant's sense; they have their own possibilities of cultural expression…"[14]

With this emphasis on the role of the symbol, Cassirer effected a shift from the "critique of reason" to the "critique of culture," recognizing that our knowledge of the objective world is not originally formed by the pure reason of the Kantian transcendental subject, but through the multitude of symbolic interactions that we have with our world. It is these symbolic interactions which are responsible for the progressive development of reason in human cultural life. But it is not only the development of our cultural products that is affected by this shift to the symbolic. Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms is equally a shift in thought about the nature of the subject—human being itself. This central insight of the importance of the symbolic led Cassirer, when considering the fundamental difference between human life and animal life in *An Essay on Man*, to characterize human being as *animal symbolicum*.[15]

For Cassirer, life is a *Urphänomen*, a basis phenomenon, which is primary and which therefore cannot be elucidated in terms of a definition, nor explained in terms of more fundamental causes. "The fundamental reality, the *Urphänomen*, in the sense of Goethe, the ultimate phenomenon may, indeed, be designated by the term "life". This phenomenon is accessible to everyone; but it is "incomprehensible" in the sense that it

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[14] Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer*, 100.
[15] Cassirer, Ernst. *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 26. (Hereafter cited as EM)

admits of no definition, no abstract theoretical explanation."[16] For Cassirer, the phenomenon of life is not something fixed, it is a dynamic process. As life, human beings are thus characterized by process but they are additionally the kind of being which is not only *engaged* in the process of life, but which also becomes *conscious* of its own life through the symbolic forms. As Cassirer writes, "…myth, religion, art, science are nothing else than the different steps made by man in his consciousness, in his reflective interpretation of life. Each of them is a mirror of our human experience which, as it were, possesses its own angle of refraction."[17] Human life, in so far as it is capable of understanding and reflection, cannot be reduced to the sort of life that characterizes the animal world. Human life contains something *more* than animal life. The traditional way of distinguishing humans from animals is to say that humans have a capacity which animals lack—a capacity for reason. Hence human being is *animal rationale*. But this is not a characterization that Cassirer accepts.

As already mentioned, reason is not something that Cassirer takes to be given to humanity in a complete and final state. It is something that develops along with human culture, over the course of time. The rationality exhibited in the creations of primitive man, for example, is surely almost unrecognizable when compared to the rationality exhibited in our modern scientific and cultural accomplishments. Therefore, instead of *animal rationale*, in *An Essay on Man* Cassirer identifies human life as *animal symbolicum* and in so doing rejects what he sees as the tendency of the rationalist tradition, culminating in Hegel, to reduce the various concrete manifestations of Spirit to

[16] Cassirer, Ernst. "Language and Art II," in *Symbol, Myth, Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 193-194.
[17] Cassirer, "Language and Art II," 194.

a universal principle of reason or logic.[18] Cassirer argues that "Reason is a very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man's cultural life in all their richness and variety. Hence, instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as an *animal symbolicum*."[19]

Although the symbol is a uniquely human phenomenon, Cassirer does not deny that animals regularly engage in symbolic-like behaviors. He cites the examples of Pavlov's dog-conditioning experiments and Yerkes' token-reward experiments with apes as examples of behaviors related to the representative nature of stimuli.[20] But Cassirer notes an important distinction between the capacities of animals and humans, which he elucidates in terms of the difference between the signal and the symbol. "Symbols—in the proper sense of this term—cannot be reduced to mere signals. Signals and symbols belong to two different universes of discourse: a signal is a part of the physical world of being; a symbol is a part of the human world of meaning. Signals are "operators"; symbols are "designators.""[21] Whereas signals remain tied to their physical environment and are related to their reference only by an association, symbols have an essential functional value that is not reducible to their physical presence: they possess a meaning. While animals regularly react to signals, as when a dog reacts to changes in his master's behaviour, they do not exhibit the capacity to recognize symbols. To clarify the distinction between signs and symbols Cassirer cites the example of the discovery of names by Helen Keller[22] who, while already able to associate certain tactile impressions (signals) with certain things, had a new world opened up to her upon discovering that

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[18] See PSFv1, 83.
[19] EM, 26.
[20] EM, 28.
[21] EM, 32.
[22] See PSFv3, 112f. and EM, 33ff.

things have names, like “water” or “door.” Names, as symbols contain more than a mere association, they contain a reference to a range of phenomenon within a meaningful totality. The movement from signals to symbols, as Cassirer argues, causes a change in one’s relation to the world by enacting a symbolic distance. As he explains,

> When the representative function of names has thus dawned on a child, his whole inner attitude toward reality has changed—a fundamentally new relation between subject and object has come into being. Only now do the objects which hitherto acted directly on the emotions and will begin in a sense to recede into the distance: into a distance where they can be “looked at,” “intuited,” in which they can be actualized in their spatial outlines and independent qualitative determinations.[23]

The distance that is enacted by the symbol constitutes a break in the immediate relationship that dominates animal life, the relationship between what Uexküll’s biology refers to as the “receptor system” and the “effector system.” The stimuli that an animal receives through its receptors occasion a more or less predictable type of reaction or movement through its effector system. For humans this process of stimulus and reaction can be mediated by a process of thought, which itself cannot occur without the aid of the symbolic. As Cassirer notes, this marks a crucial difference between mere reaction and human responses. “There is an unmistakable difference between organic reactions and human responses. In the first case a direct and immediate answer is given to an outward stimulus; in the second case the answer is delayed. It is interrupted and retarded by a slow and complicated process of thought.”[24] The “shell” of the immediacy of an animal’s environment, from which it cannot break free, is an un-distanced outlook on its world, unmediated by thought or the symbolic function, resulting in an inability to have its world as an object for it. This act of attaining a distance from the world through the

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[23] PSFv3, 113.
[24] EM, 24.

symbolic is not something that can happen all at once. In fact, the building of our symbolic world is the very theme of Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. As Cassirer summarizes, "Language and art, myth and theoretical knowledge all contribute to…this process of mental distanciation: they are the major stages on the path which leads from the space of what can be grasped and effected, in which the animal lives and within which it remains confined, to the space of sensory experience and thought, to the horizon of the mind."[25] Both within the progress of each symbolic form, and in the transition from one form to another, human understanding and culture progressively increase their distance from the immediacy of life and move into the realm of spirit. [26]

Habermas agrees with and confirms what we have just said about Cassirer—that the creation of meaning through symbolic formation is a distinctly human mode of existence—when he writes:

> …the fact that sensory contact with the world is reworked into something meaningful through the use of symbols is the defining feature of human existence, and also constitutes, from a normative standpoint, the basic trait of a properly human mode of being. In other words, the objectifying force of symbolic mediation breaks the animal immediacy of a nature which impacts on the organism from within and without; it thereby creates that distance from the world which makes possible a thoughtful, reflectively controlled reaction to the world on the part of subjects who are able to say 'no'.[27]

This capacity for thought and reflection, and the ability to say "no," constitutes what Habermas calls "the liberating power of symbols." This is a characterization that Cassirer

[25] Cassirer, *Geist und Leben*, ed. Ernst W. Orth pp. 45ff. as quoted in Habermas, "The Liberating Power of Symbols," p. 8.
[26] It should be noted here that Cassirer does not view the term "spirit" as denoting a substantial entity. In his own words: "We must not understand the term "Geist" or spirit as designating a metaphysical entity opposed to another called "matter."… The term "Geist" is correct; but we must not use it as a name of a substance—a thing "quod in se est et per se concipitur." We should use it in a functional sense as a comprehensive name for all those functions which constitute and build up the world of human culture." Cassirer, Ernst. "Structuralism in Modern Linguistics" in Word: *Journal of the Linguistic Circle of New York* 1: 113-114.
[27] Habermas, "The Liberating Power of Symbols," 7.

would undoubtedly agree with, given his conclusion in *An Essay on Man* that "Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science, are various phases in this process. In all of them man discovers and proves a new power—the power to build up a world of his own, an "ideal" world."[28]

So far we have seen how Cassirer's shift to a philosophy centered around the symbol represents not only a reinterpretation of our human culture and its products, but equally of the subjective aspect of human life itself. This reformulation led Cassirer to characterize man as *animal symbolicum*, rather than *animal rationale*. We saw that symbols create a distance between human being and its world, allowing humanity to break away from an animal immediacy and to reflect upon itself and the world. Finally, we suggested that this symbolic distance provides the power for humanity to build up its own ideal world. What we have therefore shown is that human life is thoroughly characterized by the symbolic, and that life makes use of symbols to construct its world. In the next section, we will demonstrate that Cassirer's notion of the symbolic is, in turn, rooted in the phenomenon of life. We shall trace the development of Cassirer's model for understanding the symbolic backwards from language, through myth, and finally to body-soul relation which constitutes human life.

1.2 Life as the Prototype of the Symbolic

As mentioned above, the symbolic is a defining element of human life. But just what exactly is the origin of Cassirer's conception of the symbolic? This has not yet been made clear. Indeed, Skidelsky observes that the term "symbol" is capable of causing

[28] EM, 228.

some confusion. "Modern readers are apt to be mislead by the term, taking it in its standard sense to refer to crowns, crucifixes, and the like."[29] It is correct that the term "symbol," in its usual usage, is associated solely with those products of human culture which we somehow endow with a meaning. But as Skidelsky continues, "Cassirer's concept of symbolism refers in the first instance not to cultural artifacts but to a natural potency inherent in consciousness as such."[30] Cassirer sees the symbolic function at work not only in our manufactured cultural icons and in our systems of language and science, but also in every meaningful perceptual experience. And thus he articulates his expanded notion of the symbolic:

> We on the other hand have given the concept of the symbol another and broader meaning from the very start. In it we have attempted to encompass the totality of those phenomena in which the sensuous is in any way filled with meaning, in which a sensuous content, while preserving the mode of its existence and facticity, represents a particularization and embodiment, a manifestation and incarnation of a meaning.[31]

This broadened definition means that the symbolic is present whenever we are presented with a meaning, including the sensuous phenomena of our perceptive experience. While we will consider the symbolic nature of perception in detail in the next chapter, we should note that these two realms of the symbolic led Cassirer to make an important distinction between "artificial" and "natural" symbolism.

Artificial symbols are those that are made by human beings: the objects, texts or similarly embodied, sensuous things that we endow with meaning. For example, the words that combine to constitute a language are artificial symbols because they are constructed by human beings. Artificial symbols are what constitute the symbolic forms,

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[29] Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer*, 101.
[30] Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer*, 101.
[31] PSFv3, 93.

and it is the character of such symbols to partake of some degree of arbitrariness. For example, the word designating a particular phenomenon, say “red,” could be different than it is since different languages have different words and syntactical structures. As Krois notes, in the case of artificial symbols we use an energy of the mind to impart a meaning. He cites Cassirer’s definition of symbolic form that each involves an “energy of the mind by which an intelligible content of meaning is attached to a concrete, sensory sign.”[32] Natural symbolism, on the other hand, refers to the fact that our perception always involves a factor of representation which is not created by us (at least not in any intentional sense) yet which makes possible the presentation of meaningful perceptual content. Natural symbolism is closely connected to Cassirer’s notion of symbolic pregnance (which we shall discuss in detail in the next chapter), which is “the way in which a perception as a sensory experience contains a meaning which it immediately and concretely represents.”[33] One can see why Krois observes that the natural symbolism we find in perception, and the artificial symbolism we find in symbolic forms, involve opposites directions of meaning. “In the case of symbolic form we can speak of the intentionality of meaning, but in the case of symbolic pregnance the directionality of meaning has been reversed; the sensory contains a meaning which it presents.”[34] While these two forms of symbolism are complementary, one is afforded an explanatory priority over the other. For Cassirer, it is the natural symbols that are primary since we cannot properly understand artificial signs as the origin of the power of signification, but only as an application of it. It is for that reason that Cassirer, in his general introduction "to the

[32] Krois, John Michael. "Cassirer’s "Prototype and Model" of Symbolism : Its Sources and Significance," Science in Context 12: 540.
[33] PSF v.3, 202.
[34] Krois, “Prototype and Model”, 540.

Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, writes that an understanding of how we build up our great systems of symbolic forms requires us to first understand how the symbolic is rooted in our natural consciousness.

> We must go back to "natural" symbolism, to that representation of consciousness as a whole which is necessarily contained or at least projected in every single moment and fragment of consciousness, if we wish to understand the artificial symbols, the arbitrary signs which consciousness creates in language, art, and myth. The force and effect of these mediating signs would remain a mystery if they were not ultimately rooted in an original spiritual process which belongs to the very essence of consciousness.[35]

But this demand that Cassirer makes—the demand to seek out a natural basis for the power of signification, rather than view it as simply an artificial power of the intellect—runs counter to the customary way in which philosophers have tended to view the symbolic.

The model typically employed for understanding the symbolic power employed—a model used both by Cassirer's contemporaries as well as by those who followed him—is language. As Krois notes, taking language as the model for the symbolic requires a theory which sees symbols simply as creations of arbitrary relations between a signifier and a signified, based purely upon convention. He cites Saussure as an example:

> Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process; that is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression is also the most characteristic; in this sense linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system.[36]

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[35] PSF v.1, 105-106.
[36] Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York:McGraw-Hill, 1966), 68. As quoted by Krois, John Michael, "Prototype and Model", 533.

Indeed, it is a model that Krois argues Cassirer also took up, at least during his early work on *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.[37] There, Krois argues, Cassirer regarded language as central to understanding the symbolic and it was largely the influence of Wilhelm von Humboldt's philosophy of language that led Cassirer to this conception. Habermas, also observing this point, writes: "Cassirer's original achievement consists in a semiotic transformation of Kantian transcendental philosophy…Cassirer was the first to perceive the paradigmatic significance of Humboldt's philosophy of language…"[38] Krois furthers our understanding of Humboldt's influence by noting that: "Cassirer first developed his conception of symbolic forms utilizing a distinction he borrowed from Humboldt's philosophy of language. Humboldt distinguished between language as a fixed structure, as "Ergon," and language as a process, "Energia,"…Cassirer defined symbolic forms as the energies by which concrete sensory signs are related to contents of meaning."[39] Conceiving language as Energia, as an energy, means understanding it as a process and as a potential for the development of meaning. Language is not simply an Ergon, a product which, once created, remains fixed and lifeless. Thus Cassirer notes, "Language like art cannot be conceived as a mere work of the spirit, but must be regarded as a form of spiritual *energy*."[40] As Cassirer writes, this character of language as an energy for the creation of meaning allows it to overcome the opposition between subject and object:

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[37] I find that there is a least a prima fascia case for doubting Krois argument that language serves as a model for the symbolic generally for Cassirer in the first volume *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, since that is where Cassirer makes the call to return to natural symbolism. Nevertheless Cassirer's thinking was clearly influenced by considering language and so much of Krois argument holds.
[38] Here Habermas is referring to Cassirer's treatment of Humboldt in the 1923 essay "The Kantian Element in Wilhelm von Humboldt's Philosophy of Language."
[39] Krois, John Michael. "The Priority of "Symbolism" over Language in Cassirer's Philosophy," Synthese, published online 2009: 3.
[40] PSF v.1, 146.

> For Humboldt, the phonetic sign which represents the material of all language formation is in a sense the bridge between the subjective and objective, because in it the essential factors of the two are combined. For on the one hand the sound is spoken, that is, produced and formed by ourselves; but on the other hand, as a sound heard, it is a part of the sensible reality that surrounds us. We apprehend and know it as something both "inward" and "outward"—as an inward energy which assumes objective form in the outward world."[41]

It is this capacity of symbolic form to overcome the opposition between subject and object that Habermas has in mind when he writes that Cassirer transformed Kant's philosophy. "By commandeering Kant's notion of the transcendental, so to speak, and transforming the world-constituting activity of the knowing subject into the world-disclosing function of the trans-subjective form of language, it exploded the architectonic of the philosophy of consciousness as a whole. Symbolic form overcomes the opposition of subject and object."[42] But in the passage just cited, by identifying language as the transcendental aspect of Cassirer's philosophy, Habermas shows us that he sees language as being Cassirer's essential model for the symbolic, generally. This is also demonstrated when Habermas later suggests that Cassirer did not fully realize the implications of his own innovations, and that in order to take his project to its completion, Cassirer would have had to "transform the heuristic priority which the transcendental analysis of language…does in fact enjoy in his researches into a systematic priority. He would have had to give language and the lifeworld a central position in the construction of symbolic forms." [43] What Habermas fails to realize, but what Krois sees quite clearly, is that while the development of Cassirer's notion of the symbolic begins with language and with his reading of Humboldt, it does not end there. Language does not remain the paradigmatic case for the symbolic in general.

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[41] PSF v.1, 91-92.
[42] Habermas, "The Liberating Power of Symbols", 15.
[43] Habermas, "The Liberating Power of Symbols", 22.

Cassirer's shift away from language as the model for the symbolic runs counter to the trend among many philosophers who base their philosophies of the symbol, their semiotics, upon it. But while language, as a system of arbitrary signs, represents an application of the symbolic power, it does not suffice to account for this power generally. Krois notes that Cassirer does accept that artificial signs do indeed have a conventional nature. "Cassirer admitted in his discussions with Moritz Schlick that cultural signs have an arbitrary and conventional nature, but this only emphasized for him the importance of the question how it was possible that something sensory ever becomes a carrier of meaning."[44] While language may well characterize those artificial signs that constitute the symbolic forms, given its arbitrary nature, it surely cannot characterize the natural symbolism that constitutes our perception. Cassirer comes closer to explicating a model for symbolism in general when he turns his attention to the symbolic form of mythical thought.

In the period between the publication of the first and second volumes of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer discovered the wealth of the Warburg Library, including its unique collection of works on symbolism, anthropology, and ethnography. The research that Cassirer conducted at the Warburg Library had a profound impact on the direction of the project of the philosophy of symbolic forms and, as Krois observes, in the process of writing the second and third volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer's thought "…underwent a change, and this change is what actually led to the "symbolic turn" in his philosophy. Until this change occurred—midway in his writing—his thought remained within the framework of philosophy of language."[45]

[44] Krois, John Michael, "Prototype and Model", 533.
[45] Krois, John Michael. "The Priority of Symbolism over Language", 3.

Thanks to the Warburg Library, Cassirer gained access to a collection of books which he found, quite literally, to be organized around the same questions that he was in fact dealing with. In the course of his reading, Cassirer developed an understanding of the symbol as instantiated in structures much more basic than language—structures such as gesture and ritual. As more basic than language, these types of symbolic behaviors cannot be reduced to, nor understood by, a model of the symbolic based on language. This led Cassirer to posit the symbolic form of mythical thought as the primary symbolic form.

> Here we encounter a law that holds equally for all symbolic forms, and bears essentially on their evolution. None of them arise initially as separate, independently recognizable forms, but every one of them must first be emancipated from the common matrix of myth. All mental contents, no matter how truly they evince a separate systematic realm and a 'principle' of their own, are actually known to us only as thus involved and grounded. Theoretical, practical and aesthetic consciousness, the world of language and of morality, the basic forms of the community and the state—they are all originally tied up with mythico-religious conceptions.[46]

Whereas the symbols involved in language are constructed and exhibit a clear arbitrariness, the nature of symbols proper to mythical life do not present themselves as being arbitrary, but rather appear to place us in direct contact with what they represent. For example, a Mayan community may hold the mountain in whose valley they live to represent a great God who nourishes and protects their community. But the mountain is not simply representing the God as the word "apple" represents the familiar fruit it designates, rather the mountain is perceived to be the God itself, and therefore is not an arbitrary symbol.[47]

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[46] Cassirer, Ernst. *Language and Myth*, as quoted in Krois, "The Priority of Symbolism over Language", 6.

[47] This is not to say that the symbols involved in myth do not partake in a degree of arbitrariness. Certainly the Mayan beliefs could have been otherwise. However, within mythical consciousness, unlike in language, there is no separation posited between the symbol and what it represents. The mountain is the God. The word "mountain" is not the actual mountain.

By the time of the publication of the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, language no longer represented the paradigmatic case of the symbolic. Rather, Cassirer established the symbolic form of myth as that from which all others must develop. The symbolic structures that constitute mythical life, things like gestures and rituals, are more primitive than language. But that is not to suggest that they are somehow less valid or less symbolic. Rather, mythical thought is more primitive than language in the sense that it has not yet come to incorporate the myriad theoretical distinctions that we find in language. Where language conveys a world populated by things and attributes, myth has not yet carved up the world in this fashion. "Myth, in particular, shows us a world which is far from being without structure, immanent articulation, yet does not know the organization of reality according to things and attributes. Here all configurations of being show a peculiar fluidity; they are differentiated without being separated from one another."[48] In myth the differentiations that are present in our theoretical understanding—the division of the world into genera and species, things and attributes—are not yet fully formed. Myth is, to use a metaphor, the nursery of all such distinctions.

But we are in danger here of losing the course of our inquiry. Earlier we made it clear that the task of this thesis was not to provide an examination of the various symbolic forms, but rather to investigate the primary basis for the symbolic in the first place. While myth is prior to language, as a symbolic form it is still an artificial, created mode of symbolism and not the origin of the symbolic generally. The origin of the symbolic can only be found in the realm of our living experience. However, of all the symbolic forms, myth comes closest to life and does reveal certain modes of experience

[48] PSF v.3, 61.

which would be otherwise obscured by language or theoretical knowledge. As Cassirer suggests, the form of myth places us in direct contact with the world:

> Myth, however, places us in the living center of this sphere, for its particularity consists precisely in showing us a mode of world formation which is independent of all modes of mere objectivization…Here the phenomenon as it is given in any moment never has the character of mere representation, it is one of authentic presence: here a reality is not "actualized" through mediation of the phenomenon but is present in full actuality in the phenomenon.[49]

Unlike the theoretical world of the sciences, mythical consciousness does not recognize a world that is composed of "things" and "attributes", rather we find in myth a living world, one which is permeated by a "feeling of life". What the form of myth reveals for Cassirer is that our perception is not first of all of things and attributes, but rather that the perception of expression takes priority.

For Cassirer, the view of reality as an aggregate of things, thing-perception, only occurs after a more basic mode of perception, expression-perception. In thing-perception we are primarily oriented toward an "it", but in expression-perception the sharp differentiation between things is not the dominate factor, and we find ourselves primarily oriented toward a "thou." The world of myth, in which expression-perception is dominate, is not a world populated first of all by things and their attributes, rather it is a living world populated by expressive characters and forces:

> For the theoretical reality itself was not originally experienced as a totality of physical bodies, endowed with definite attributes and qualities. Rather, there is a kind of *experience* of reality which is situated wholly outside this form of scientific explanation and interpretation. It is present wherever the being that is apprehended in perception confronts us not as a reality of things, of mere objects, but as a kind of presence of living subjects.[50]

[49] PSF v.3, 67-68.
[50] PSF v.3, 62.

For Cassirer, we cannot explain our perceptive experience of life based on our perception of things. Our perception of a "thou" cannot be reduced to a perception of an "it." Therefore, it is the perception of life, of a thou, which is essentially earlier to the perception of things as inanimate collections of attributes. In support of this thesis Cassirer cites Kurt Koffka and the example of the recognition of voices and faces in young infants, before they are able to recognize concrete objects within the world:

> For the chaos theory, the phenomenon corresponding to a human face is merely a confusion of the most divergent sensations of light, dark, color, which moreover are in constant flux, changing with every movement of the person in question or the child himself, and with the lighting. And yet by the second month the child knows his mother's face; by the middle of his first year he reacts to a friendly or angry face, and so differently that there is no doubt what was given to him phenomenally was the friendly or angry face and not any distribution of light and dark. To explain this by experience, to assume that these phenomenon arose by combination of simple optical sensations with each other and with pleasant or unpleasant consequences from the original chaos of sensation, seems impossible…We are left with the opinion that phenomena such as "friendliness" or "unfriendliness" are extremely primitive—even more primitive, for example, than that of a blue spot.[51]

Now while the advent of the linguistic consciousness means that our own everyday world is not anything like the experience of mythical consciousness, we nevertheless do not lose the fact that the perception of expression precedes that of the expression of things and attributes, since ultimately it is expression perception that allows us to perceive the world of intentional objects – be it other people or their artificial symbols. "It is the pure fact of expression—the fact that a certain phenomenon in its simple "givenness" and visibility makes itself known to be inwardly animated—which first and most immediately tells us how consciousness, while remaining purely within itself, can at the same time apprehend another reality."[52] It is this character of inner animation that is key to the experience of

[51] PSF v.3, 64-65.
[52] PSF v.3, 92.

expression, and the prototypical case for any inward animation, as well as for the symbolic generally, is the body-soul relationship.

For Cassirer the body and soul are indissolubly linked. Our experience of our own body and our experience of other bodies clearly bears this out. One need only engage in a conversation to experience the absolute simultaneity of body and soul. However, this original identity is always susceptible to being made into an absolute difference, as Cassirer observes, when why try to transform this lived identity into a cognitive unity:

> From the standpoint of pure experience, from the standpoint of consciousness, it is certain that we know neither a soul without body, nor a body without soul. On the other hand, this *known* unity is by no means a *cognitive* unity. Although immediate knowledge shows us physical and psychic factors, not only in combination but indissolubly linked, we cannot succeed in translating this actual bond into a conceptual bond having necessity in the sense of a concept.[53]

The unity of body and soul cannot survive the transition from the perspective of experience to the perspective of theoretical thinking. In this respect the body-soul relationship represents a parallel with the symbolic relationship. Neither the body and soul relationship, nor the relationship between a symbol and its meaning, can be understood as a unity in the terms of causal, substantial thinking. Thus Cassirer writes:

> The relation of the appearance to the psychic meaning that is expressed in it; of the word to the meaning present through it, and finally of any abstract sign to the meaning content to which it points—all this has no analogy in the manner in which things stand side by side in space, in which events follow in time, or in which empirical changes are produced by one another; its specific meaning can only be taken from itself but not explained through analogies from the world that is made possible only by this meaning.[54]

Therefore, since the relationship expressed in every instance of the symbolic is not explainable on the basis of some substantial or causal connection, Cassirer must find another paradigm for understanding the symbolic. This paradigm he finds in the body-

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[53] PSF v.3, 96.
[54] PSF v.3, 101.

soul relationship that characterizes human life. This relation shows us an inwardly animated phenomenon, just as in expression-perception. Therefore, Cassirer concludes that:

> The relation between body and soul represents the prototype and model for a purely symbolic relation, which cannot be converted into a relation between things or into a causal relation. Here there is originally neither an inside and outside nor a before and after, neither an agent nor an effect; here we have a combination which does not have to be composed of separate elements but which is in a primary sense a meaningful whole which interprets itself, which separates into a duality of factors in order to interpret itself in them.[55]

It is in this relationship of the body and soul that Cassirer sees the "model and prototype" for all symbolic relations generally. In other words, the symbolic relation is originally founded in the relationship of the body and soul that constitutes human life, a relation in which we have an original unity, whose differentiation is a self-differentiation required for the making present of meaning. This relation applies equally to all modes of symbolism—from the artificial symbols of language and the sciences, to the natural symbolism present in all of our perceptions. While we have now shown that Cassirer's model for the symbolic is based in the living relation of the body and soul, and have touched briefly on the modes of artificial symbolism, to continue our project we must now turn to gaining a better understanding of how the symbolic power is at work in our perceptive experience.

[55] PSF v.3, 100.

Chapter 2: Perception and Symbolic Pregnance

One could perhaps characterize modern philosophy as a progressive attempt to find a secure ground for knowledge. The problem has, of course, been formulated in many different ways: Descartes posed the question of how any certain knowledge is possible; Kant inquired into the conditions of the possibility for experience; and in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries philosopher after philosopher has taken up the question of how meaning is possible. These questions, while differing in orientation, are similar in an important respect: an attempt at answering any one of them requires some attempt at reconciling the disparate nature of the material world and the world of thought, the world of empirical contingency and the world of rational necessity. Or, as Cassirer would put it, the aspects of matter and form. In the first section of this chapter we shall see how the respective attempts of the empiricist and rationalist traditions, as well as Kant's attempt, to reconcile these seeming mutually exclusive worlds ultimately fail to explain the phenomenon of perception. In the second section we shall see how Cassirer begins his own theory from a position that takes perception to be immediately meaningful, and in which the material and intellectual factors are not opposed to each other. We shall see, through an exploration of Cassirer's concept of symbolic pregnance, how the structure of the symbolic is immediately present in all of our perception, and how this allows Cassirer to do away with the notion of any unformed sensations.

2.1 Cassirer's Rejection of the Traditional Theories

As is well known, the empiricist and rationalist traditions approach the problem of the meaningfulness of perception from opposite directions. Typically, empiricism asserts

that the pure receptivity of the senses, combined with some principle of association of impressions, is sufficient to give form to the otherwise unformed, raw impressions with which we are continuously presented. Conversely, rationalism asserts the priority of the spontaneous formative activity of the mind, relying on autonomous acts of judgment to impart form to the data with which our senses present us. Cassirer argues against both empiricism and rationalism, maintaining that neither is able to account for how our perceptual experience is meaningful, that is, how a genuine synthesis is accomplished. He argues, in much the same way that Merleau-Ponty does in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, that although empiricism and rationalism approach perception from opposite directions, both make the same fundamental mistake: they uphold an original dichotomy between the sensory and the intellectual aspects of perception and are therefore unable to account for the relationship between those two aspects. In other words, each presupposes original, unformed sensations which must then be rendered intelligible by some mechanism after the fact of the original sensation. But neither empiricism nor rationalism is able to adequately explain the mechanism of this "synthesis" of impressions.

According to Cassirer, empiricism, for its part, "underestimates the importance of the purely intellectual factors and moreover…presents an inadequate and distorted picture of sensibility, which it limits to "impressions," to the immediate givenness of simple sensations."[56] Empiricism claims that our senses receive impressions from the world which are then ordered through some principle of association, itself present in the impressions themselves. For example, the likeness and proximity of impressions of the quality "red" might cause one to recognize an apple. But Cassirer denies that there is a layer of raw impressions that is prior to perception and which are then combined through

[56] PSF 1 p. 87.

some mechanism, since nowhere in our experience do we ever find such a layer of unformed impressions. What we do find in our experience are things that are always already in some form; things like apples which, since we already perceive them as unities, we can then say that they have properties like "red." Moreover, he argues that the meaning and mechanism of "association," is never fully elaborated by empiricist philosophers. There are innumerable criteria with which we could associate impressions—similarity, proximity and so on—and even if we select one, there is no guarantee that the criterion we select will have any necessary and essential relation to objective reality. All activity of association, as an activity of mere selection, can therefore only ever remain at the level of description and cannot provide an underlying rule for the combination of impressions into meaningful wholes. Therefore Cassirer concludes that, for the empiricist theory of association, "it is evident that this term designates only the naked fact of combination as such, but does not say anything whatsoever regarding its specific character and law. The diversity of the paths and directions by which consciousness arrives at its syntheses is totally obscured."[57] Thus empiricism, in its inability to clearly illuminate the mechanisms of association ends up merely presupposing this very phenomenon of the combination of impressions, rather than explaining it.

Where empiricism sought the basis of the combination of impressions in the impressions themselves, rationalism dismisses any possibility of finding the basis of combination within sensibility. Rather, it finds this basis in the mind's power of judgment. For the rationalist, the images we are presented with in sensation remain mere images and do not contain any principle of the unity of objects. Such a unity can only

[57] PSF v.1, 102-103.

come about through the inspection of the mind, via the unconscious power of judgment, which remains totally independent from impressions and therefore, as Cassirer observes, approaches the phenomenon of perception from the outside.

> This fundamental theory of rationalism stands in the sharpest antithesis to the empiricist theory of "associations"—but it too fails to overcome the inner tension between two fundamentally different elements of consciousness, between its mere "matter" and its pure "form." For here too the *synthesis* of the contents of consciousness is based upon an activity which in some way approaches the particular contents from outside.[58]

The rationalist theory, in maintaining the original separation between sensuous impressions ("matter") and their articulation into meaningful wholes ("form"), thereby "approaches from the outside" because it relies on a power of judgment which is external to sensation.[59] For the rationalist, outward perception presents us only with images that are purely subjective. Only pure thought, the power of judgment, enables us to recognize any unity among the diversity of impressions. But this unity is a purely formal unity, as Cassirer notes, "which can neither be heard nor seen as such, but can be apprehended only in the logical process of pure thought."[60] But in leaving this unity solely in the realm of thought, rationalism is unable to make contact with the perceived world. Perception, for the rationalist, remains meaningless in so far as no synthesis of the contents of perception is possible when judgment remains entirely exterior to the actual contents of sensation. Rationalism remains as equally vague about the power of judgment as the empiricist did about the principle of association, resulting—on the part of the rationalist—in the same presupposition of the combining power rather than its

[58] PSF v.1, 103.
[59] As we saw above, the empiricist also came at perception from the outside because the theory of the association is also something applied to an already existing layer of impressions. Even if the empiricist posits the basis of association in the impressions themselves, he still presumes that association is logically posterior to the reception of the unformed impressions themselves.
[60] PSF v.1, 104.

explanation. Both theories therefore fail to fully develop the fundamental relation between the sensory and the intellectual elements of perception and end up presupposing the very fact of the combination of impressions that they sought to justify.

Ultimately, both empiricism and rationalism fail for Cassirer because they both begin from the position that there is a separation, a mutual exclusivity, between the *mundus sensibilis* and the *mundus intelligiblilis*. Each accordingly presumes that the senses passively receive the unformed matter of sensation and then each is left to justify the basis of the giving of form to these impressions. But for Cassirer, beginning from this position means that neither empiricism nor rationalism is ever able to justify how the content of our consciousness reflects an objective reality.

> But what both overlook in equal degree is the circumstance that all the psychological or logical processes, here invoked, come in a manner of speaking too late; they all refer to a combination of elements which are viewed as in some way existing, as established before the combination. But the question involved here does not begin with the possibility and basis of combination; it is concerned with the possibility of positing the ability to combine. No associative connection of mere impressions and no logical interweaving of them, however close, can explain the original mode of postulation inherent in the fact that a phenomenon points to an objective reality, that it is given as a factor in an objective intuition.[61]

Empiricism and rationalism each arrive "too late" because they presuppose an original separation which must then be overcome. What both fail to account for is that in the phenomenon of perception, at every moment, the objective world is already combined into a world that is meaningful.[62] There is an obvious parallel here with Merleau-Ponty's

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[61] PSF v.3, 127.

[62] If we were to try to articulate the difference between empiricism and rationalism in terms of the notion of symbolic distance discussed below, we could say that empiricism, in reducing all knowledge and perception to sensation collapses any symbolic distance, and that rationalism in placing the burden of meaning and understanding entirely within the realm of pure thought magnifies our symbolic distance to the point of infinity, losing any contact at all with the objective world.

account of how both empiricism and rationalism fail to grasp the phenomenon of experience.

> Where empiricism was deficient was in any internal connection between the object and the act which it triggers off. What intellectualism lacks is contingency in the occasions of thought. In the first case consciousness is too poor, in the second too rich for any phenomena to appeal compellingly to it. Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking for it, and intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching.[63]

But just as Merleau-Ponty is as critical of Kant as he is of Descartes, so too does Cassirer see fault in Kant's solution to the problem of reconciling these disparate factors of perception. However, Cassirer does recognize the important advance that Kant makes by reversing the direction of the problem.

Kant makes an important step toward reconciling the dilemma between the empiricist demand for the passivity of the senses and rationalist demand for the spontaneous activity of the mind, by making them both essential components in perception. In keeping with his Copernican turn toward the subject, Kant's critical method represents a reversal in the traditional direction of the analysis of perception. Where previously the world of things was taken to be in some way the cause of the phenomenon of perception (and hence of our knowledge), now the subject itself is seen as playing an active role in constructing its knowledge of the world through perception. As Cassirer observes, Kant's analysis "moves not from things to phenomena but from phenomena to things. Accordingly, it must look on perception and its properties not as conditioned from outside, but as conditioning—that is, as a constitutive factor in our knowledge of things."[64] Our perceptual experience is only possible on the basis of the

[63] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 28.
[64] PSF v.3, 59.

interaction of sensibility and the spontaneous formative power of the a priori concepts of the understanding. As Cassirer notes, the question for Kant then becomes one of how to fit the given data of sensation into the a priori concepts of the understanding, which do not originate in sensation.[65] But Cassirer argues that the answer to this question remains ambiguous in Kant. For while Kant appears to recognize the need for the simultaneity of matter and form in perception, his account of the powers involved remains "expressed in the concepts of eighteenth century faculty psychology."[66] Our faculty of sensation receives unformed impressions, the matter of sensation, and our faculty of the understanding imparts form to those impressions and in so doing allows them to become a content for consciousness. But formulated in this way the "matter" of sensation that we receive from our senses and the "form" which is imparted to it by the understanding remain originally separate and belong to two different domains. Kant's conception of perception can thus be construed as maintaining that the faculties are empirically real, resulting in the same dualism between the physical and intellectual aspects of perception that empiricism and rationalism upheld. As Cassirer observes, "And even with Kant, in the beginning of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, this antithesis between sensibility and thought, between the "material" and "formal" determinates of consciousness, retains its full force."[67] Sensation and understanding remain two distinct faculties even though they may share a common root. Kant seems to undo the very simultaneity of matter and form that he is searching for by positing different faculties that empirically contribute these elements in the process of perception. As Cassirer notes, in this interpretation of Kant the question of perception becomes a question of empirical faculty psychology and the

[65] PSF v.3, 6.
[66] PSF v.3, 194.
[67] PSFv1, 104.

understanding becomes merely "a magician and necromancer animating dead sensation, awakening it to the life of consciousness."[68] For Cassirer, this represents an unfortunate abstraction of theoretical thinking, where what is called for is an account of the actual phenomenon of perception.

Additionally, Cassirer argues that throughout the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant subordinates any analysis of the subjective aspects of perceptive consciousness to the overall project of grounding objective, scientific knowledge. Kant therefore treats the analysis of perception in the same manner as he treats the analysis of the theoretical knowledge of the exact sciences, subordinating them to the same a priori concepts, and in so doing misses the diversity of forms of knowledge that are possible outside the sphere of the exact natural sciences. As Cassirer observes:

> And when the transcendental critique seeks to disclose the structure of objective knowledge, it may not limit itself to the intellectual "sublimation" of experience, to the superstructure of theoretical science, but must learn to understand the substructure, the world of "sensory" perceptions, as a specifically determined and specifically organized context, as a spiritual cosmos *sui generis*.[69]

It is precisely this understanding of the world of perceptions, which Cassirer articulates in his concept of symbolic pregnance, which will be the focus of the next section.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty recognized the importance of Cassirer's demand for an understanding of experience founded upon the simultaneity of matter and form, and praises Cassirer in a footnote to the *Phenomenology of Perception*. But Merleau-Ponty also issues a criticism.

> E. Cassirer clearly has the same aim when he takes Kant to task for having most of the time analysed only an 'intellectual sublimation of experience' (Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen, T. III, p. 14), when he tries to express, through the notion of symbolic pregnancy, the absolute simultaneity of matter and form, or

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[68] PSF v.3, 195.

[69] PSF v.3, 10.

> when he adopts for his own purposes Hegel's declaration that the mind carries and preserves its past in the depths of its present…When Cassirer takes up the Kantian formula according to which consciousness can analyse only what it has synthesized, he is manifestly returning to intellectualism despite the phenomenological and even existential analyses which his book contains and which we shall have occasion to use.[70]

Merleau-Ponty praises Cassirer for both his notion of symbolic pregnance and his assertion of the simultaneity of matter and form, yet he also criticizes Cassirer for returning to a Kantian formula for consciousness. Although Merleau-Ponty does mention and cite Cassirer frequently throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he does not deal with Cassirer's arguments in any detail. Nor does he provide further evidence to support his assertion of Cassirer's intellectualism. Krois views Merleau-Ponty's criticism here as a confusion of language, stating that "…Merleau-Ponty also sees an inconsistency in Cassirer or, at least, in his language…Cassirer's language is, in fact, often "Kantian" and "intellectualistic," yet his doctrine is not."[71] Krois goes on to argue that Cassirer's theory runs counter to any intellectualism, because of its insistence that the expressive phenomena, which are the basis of all perception, are not the result of activities of the mind, but are inherently and immediately meaningful.

For Cassirer neither the empiricist, rationalist nor Kantian theories of perception succeed at explaining how we achieve a genuine synthesis because none of them are able to account for the simultaneity of the sensory and intellectual aspects that we experience in the phenomenon of perception. What is therefore required for a successful account of how our perceptive experiences are meaningful is not another theory which begins only after the material and ideal aspects of perception have split from each other, but one which originates from a place where these disparate aspects of perception are not yet

[70] Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 127n2.
[71] Krois, John Michael. *Cassirer: Symoblic Forms and History*, 90.

taken as substantially different and mutually exclusive. As Cassirer suggests, "…the unity of the matter and form of consciousness, of the "particular" and the "universal," of sensory "data" and pure "principles of order," constitutes precisely that originally certain and originally known phenomenon which every *analysis* of consciousness must take as its point of departure."[72] This point of departure is Cassirer's notion of symbolic pregnance.

2.2 Symbolic Pregnance

Symbolic pregnance is the central concept of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. It is what Krois appropriately calls Cassirer's "transcendental theory of meaning" and "the key to understanding how Cassirer's thought constitutes a transformation of transcendental philosophy."[73] Cassirer himself suggests this when he writes that the symbolic process which is involved in symbolic pregnance "is precisely the pure relation which governs the building of consciousness and which stands out in it as a genuine a priori, an essentially first factor."[74] While "Symbolische Prägnanz" has no direct English translation, as Krois notes the term "Prägnanz" "derives from the German prägen (to mint or coin and give a sharp contour) and the Latin *praegnens* (laden or ready to give birth). It embodies at once the ideas of giving form and fecundity."[75] Symbolic pregnance has two possible philosophical origins, or references. The first is Leibniz, to whom Cassirer explicitly refers; the other is to Gestalt psychology. Both references share commonalities

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[72] PSF v.1, 104.
[73] Krois, John Michael. *Cassirer: Symoblic Forms and History*, 52
[74] PSF v.3, 202-203.
[75] Krois, John Michael. *Cassirer: Symoblic Forms and History*, 53.

with Cassirer's use of the term, although Cassirer's use is not reducible to either alone. We shall first examine the connection to Leibniz.

There is no doubt that Cassirer's work, especially his early work, was influenced significantly by Leibniz. Both Cassirer's dissertation (completed in 1899) and his first book (the 1902 *Leibniz' System in seinen wissenschaftlichen Grundlagen*) focused on Leibniz. When introducing the idea of symbolic pregnance Cassirer makes explicit reference to Leibniz's idea of *praengans futuri*, which can be found in the *Monadology*[76] and in more elaborated terms in the *Theodicy*:

> It is true that God sees all at once the whole sequence of this universe, when he chooses it, and that thus he has no need of the connexion of effects and causes in order to foresee these effects. But since his wisdom causes him to choose a sequence in perfect connexion, he cannot but see one part of the sequence in the other. It is one of the rules of my system of general harmony, *that the present is big* [pregnant] *with the future*, and that he who sees all sees in that which is that which shall be…There must therefore be no doubt that effects follow their causes determinately, in spite of contingency and even freedom, which nevertheless exist together with certainty or determination.[77]

The similarity to Cassirer's use of symbolic pregnance is twofold: that the particular contains a necessary reference to other particulars and to the whole; and in terms of temporality which, for Cassirer, the "now" always bears reference to past and future nows. As Cassirer writes: "The phenomena of consciousness do not flit by as mere momentary images; what is given here points to a not-here, and what is given *now* points backward or forward to a *not-now* without this, the phenomenon of an intuitive world could not be understood or even described."[78]

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[76] Leibniz. *Monadology* §22, "The present state of a simple substance is the natural result of its precedent state, so much so that the present is pregnant with the future."
[77] Leibniz. *Theodicy*, §360.
[78] PSF v.3, 124.

The other source for Cassirer's term "symbolic pregnance" is from Gestalt psychology. This connection is the one typically cited by Cassirer's commentators as the origin of the term. While Cassirer does not explicitly make reference to Gestalt psychology in his chapter on symbolic pregnance, he was well aware of, and greatly influenced by, Gestalt psychology. This is immediately evident in the section on the pathology of the symbolic consciousness which immediately follows the section on symbolic pregnance. Cassirer draws extensively in that section upon the work of his cousin, Kurt Goldstein, in analyzing pathological cases where reduced symbolic function results. That section serves as a negative proof for symbolic pregnance. Cassirer also frequently cites the work of well-known Gestalt psychologists Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Koehler. Koffka summarizes the principle as: "psychological organization will always be as "good" as the prevailing conditions allow. In this definition the term "good" is undefined. It embraces such properties as regularity, symmetry, simplicity and others…"[79] The term "good," as later noted by Koffka, also refers to stability of organization. As Krois notes, Cassirer does make direct reference to Gestalt Psychology in connection with symbolic pregnance in an unpublished manuscript:

> From the standpoint of Gestalt psychology to every particular kind of Gestalt and Gestalt formation there corresponds also a particular kind of 'Praegnanz'…there is spatial and temporal Praegnanz, theoretical and aesthetic Praegnanz—but here we must go further here and say from our point of view: the specific particularization of 'Praegnanz' is what first founds and makes possible the specific differences among 'Gestalten'; all representation is always representation in a specific 'sense'.[80]

[79] Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, 110.
[80] Krois, John Michael. "Cassirer's Prototype and Model of Symbolism", 535.

While Cassirer's use of symbolic pregnance may originate both in Leibniz and in Gestalt psychology, we should not make the same mistake as Freudenthal[81] in assuming that Cassirer is adopting either position in its entirety, and that his use of the term does not have its own specific meaning in reference to the philosophy of symbolic forms. Cassirer's particular sense of symbolic pregnance has its origin in his early work, *Substance and Function*. There Cassirer recognizes the need for all of our perceptions to not merely be present, but also to represent, and moreover that representation is immediately part of perception, not something subsequently added to it.

> Hence if we understand "representation" as the expression of an ideal rule, which connects the present, given particular with the whole, and combines the two in an intellectual synthesis, then we have in "representation" no mere subsequent determination, but a constitutive condition of all experience. Without this apparent representation, there would also be no presentation, no immediately present content; for this latter only exists for knowledge in so far as it is brought into a system of relations, that give it spatial and temporal as well as conceptual determinateness.[82]

This notion that every particular content of perception contains an immediate reference to the whole, and that this is a condition for the possibility of all perception, is also the key notion of symbolic pregnance. The same insight is reintroduced and further developed in the first volume of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms:

> All these relations…disclose the same fundamental characteristic of consciousness, namely, that the whole is not obtained from its parts, but that every notion of a part already encompasses the notion of the whole, not as to content, but as to a general structure and form. Every particular belongs from the outset to a definite *complex* and in itself expresses the rule of this complex. It is the totality of these rules which constitutes the true unity of consciousness, as a unity of time, space, objective synthesis, etc.[83]

[81] Cf. Freudenthal, Gideon. "The Missing Core of Cassirer's Philosophy: Homo Faber in Thin Air" in *Symbolic Forms and Cultural Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 2004), 203-226.
[82] SF, 284.
[83] PSF v.1, 102.

It is this reciprocal relation which structures all aspects of consciousness—that a part always stands in relation to and represents a whole, and equally that the whole is known only through its parts—that forms the essential relation described by symbolic pregnance. Accordingly, Cassirer defines symbolic pregnance:

> By symbolic pregnance we mean the way in which a perception as a sensory experience contains at the same time a certain nonintuitve meaning which it immediately and concretely represents. Here we are not dealing with bare perceptive data, on which some sort of apperceptive acts are later grafted, through which they are interpreted, judged, transformed. Rather, it is the perception itself which by virtue of its own immanent organization, takes on a kind of spiritual articulation—which, being ordered in itself, also belongs to a determinate order of meaning… It is this ideal interwoveness, this relatedness of the single perceptive phenomenon, given here and now, to characterize a total meaning that the term "pregnance" is meant to designate."[84]

Symbolic pregnance is therefore the property of our perception that permits it to immediately contain a non-intuitive meaning, that is, a meaning which is not "given" as mere sensation. This meaning arises from the fact that every particular stands in some determinate relation to the whole of perception and, indeed, of consciousness. This meaning is not added to perception by some subsequent activity of the mind, it is immediately part of perception itself. In this way, Cassirer is able to avoid the necessity of postulating bare, unformed sensory impressions. To illustrate this relation of symbolic pregnance Cassirer uses the example of a line drawing—a simple curve. This line, unchanging in itself, may be perceived in dramatically different ways depending upon the context in which we experience it. It may been seen as a work of art, or perhaps as a symbol proper to a cult which carries a magical significance, or perhaps it is perceived by the mathematician as the representation of a trigonometric function. The line is itself

[84] PSF v.3, 202.

pregnant with a meaning which is conditioned by the total context in which we experience it.

Cassirer also articulates the relationship present in symbolic pregnance in terms of an integral and differential of perception. Each particular perceptual content, by virtue of the fact that it has differentiated itself from the whole, is able to integrate non-present factors into itself. This idea was already at work in the first volume of Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*:

> Every "simple" quality of consciousness has a definite content only in so far as it is apprehended in complete unity with certain qualities but separately from others. The function of this unity and this separation is not removable from the content of consciousness but constitutes one of its essential conditions. Accordingly there is no "something" in consciousness that does not *eo ipso* and without further mediation give rise to "another" and to a series of others. For what defines each particular content of consciousness is that in it the whole of consciousness is in some form posited and represented. Only in and through this representation does what we call the "presence" of the content become possible.[85]

Cassirer goes on to express this notion that each element of experience is both separate from, yet carries a necessary reference to, the whole of perception within the context of his discussion of symbolic pregnance by arguing that: "No conscious perception is merely given…rather, every perception embraces a definite "character of direction" by which it points beyond its here and now. As a mere perceptive *differential*, it nevertheless contains within itself the *integral* of experience."[86] This characteristic of a particular content of perception carrying within it the "integral of experience", that is, a reference to what we might call the entire perceptual field, is the crucial moment of symbolic pregnance. It is this structure that makes an objective reality possible for us, rather than merely a dissociated layer of impressions. As Cassirer writes: "It is participation in this

[85] PSF v.1, 98.
[86] PSF v.3, 203.

structure that gives to the phenomenon its objective reality and determinacy. The symbolic pregnance that it gains detracts in no way from its concrete abundance; but it does provide a guarantee that this abundance will not simply dissipate itself, but will round itself into a stable, self-contained form."[87] Our perceptive experience achieves this stability and meaning because a particular element of perception differentiates itself—stands out against—the remainder of the sensory whole[88] yet in so doing points beyond itself to that whole of perceptive experience. Indeed, as Gestalt psychology demonstrates very well, that particular element of experience that stands out can shift, and in so doing its meaning and the meaning of the whole shifts along with it. Thus, as we already quoted Cassirer as saying, every particular of perception embraces a certain "character of direction." In this manner, symbolic pregnance represents the condition for the possibility of any meaningful experience, and is why Krois calls this notion Cassirer's transcendental theory of meaning.

We have just seen how meaningful perception is made possible because the particulars of perception are always contained within some sort of structure in relation to the whole. We might now ask, returning to the framework of the empiricist/rationalist debate, whether this symbolic meaning originates in sensation or in an activity of the mind. Of course, to even ask this question is to miss the point of Cassirer's argument, since it is precisely this abstract dualism that he wishes to avoid. As Cassirer points out, symbolic pregnance originates neither in sensation nor in the mind alone:

> We have designated as symbolic pregnance the relation in consequence of which a sensuous thing embraces a meaning and represents it for consciousness: this pregnance can be reduced neither to merely reproductive processes nor to mediated intellectual processes—it must ultimately be recognized as an

[87] PSF v.3, 204.
[88] We may equally speak of a sensory field or background.

> independent and autonomous determination, without which neither an object nor a subject, neither a unity of the thing nor a unity of the self would be given to us.[89]

Cassirer asserts that symbolic pregnance cannot be reduced to a “reproductive process”, nor to a “mediated intellectual process”. In other words, symbolic pregnance is not something given in the sensations themselves, such that perception is simply a copy of an already-given reality—as might be suggested by the empiricists. Nor is it a spontaneous act of judgment, a product of the mind’s activity—as might be suggested by the rationalists. As Cassirer later writes in his essay, “The Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception,” perception is no mere copy of sensation. Rather perception, by virtue of symbolic pregnance, effects a genuine synthesis and expands upon the particular datum:

> The essential conclusion hence to be drawn is that perception in general is not confined to the mere *hic et nunc*. Perception expands the particular datum; it is integrated into a total experience; and it is only in virtue of this integration that perception can exercise its proper function as an objective factor in knowledge. If perception were tied up with the flux of impressions, it would necessarily disintegrate; for each of these impressions present the size, shape, and color of the object in a different way.[90]

This expanding of a particular datum and integrating it into a total experience is not simply a receptive act, for it incorporates the perspective from which we come to have experience, nor is it merely an active act, because it does not involve a spontaneous act of the mind. Rather, symbolic pregnance proceeds from an entirely different perspective. Symbolic pregnance—that is to say, meaningful perception—is only possible on the basis of our sensitive body being engaged in some sort of action through time.

Human beings as living organisms generally, and as mammals specifically, are endowed with sensitive bodies. We are put into contact with our world because our bodies are the kinds of things which are open to receiving sensations from that world. But

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[89] PSF v.3, 235.
[90] Cassirer, Group Concept and Perception p. 13.

the simple event of receiving a stimulus at a particular moment is not sufficient grounds upon which to explain the emergence of symbolic pregnance and meaningful experience. As Cassirer writes:

> What distinguishes the living from the dead is precisely that all living things have a history; that is to say, that the way in which they react to certain present actions depends not only on the nature of the momentary stimulus but also on earlier stimuli that have affected the organism…thus what we call conscious perception never depends solely on the present state of the body, and particularly of the brain and nervous system, but on the totality of the effects that have been exerted on them.[91]

Our perceptions are not simply the products of discrete, momentary interactions of the world with our sensitive bodies, rather every perception has a crucial temporal component. We must, so to speak, be able to connect together the past, the present, and the future, as a condition for the possibility of meaningful perceptive experience. Or, as Cassirer articulates it, meaningful experience presupposes "…that a multiplicity of temporal determinations occur within the indivisible moment of time, that the total content of consciousness given in the simple now is distributed over present, past, and future."[92] To illustrate this, Cassirer uses the example of the sense of touch. He asserts that motion and time are integral to the sense of touch, and that the properties of rough, smooth, or any other tactile phenomenon are only possible through motion. We must move our hand over the surface in order to feel it. As Cassirer observes, "…a particular sensory experience results from the conception and articulation of a definite temporal process…the passage through a sequence which can be apprehended only in succession, leads ultimately to a product that has cast off all succession and seems to stand before us

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[91] PSF v. 3, 174-175.
[92] PSF v. 3, 176.

as unitary and simultaneous."[93] This example of touch applies equally to all sensation—visual, olfactory, auditory—and thus all meaningful perception requires us to connect a 'series of impressions' through a certain period of time. Without that ability, we would have no sense.

But not only is an ability to connect past experiences a requirement for all present experiences, but so too is the ability to project ourselves into the future. As Cassirer writes, "The ego, which sees itself as standing "in time" views itself not as the sum of static events but as a being extending forward into time, striving from the present toward the future. Without this form of striving, what we call "representation," the actualization of a content can never begin for us."[94] Without a striving into the future, through an expectation, we would be unable to undertake any actions or engage in any projects. And in fact our experience of the present is as much conditioned by our memories of the past as it is by our expectations of the future. One need only consider the experience of any tool or piece of technology. One's present experience of it is always conditioned by what it is we see as its use, what we want to do with it. If one has never used a circular saw, and knows nothing of its purpose in construction, one would experience it in a far different way than if one were a master carpenter. As Cassirer observes, "in a manner of speaking the symbol hastens ahead of reality, showing it the way and clearing its path. Symbolic representation is no mere looking back on this reality as something finished, but becomes a factor and motif in its unfolding."[95] Consider what is required for this master carpenter to employ this saw in the making of a piece of furniture. She must first of all take up the project in the first place. This involves the creating of an expectation—I

[93] PSF v. 3, 178-179.
[94] PSF v. 3, 180.
[95] PSF v. 3, 182.

am going to make a table. She must also draw upon her past experience and skills in order to be able to plan the project, and equally she must integrate these distinct temporal directions into her present actions as the project unfolds. All action therefore requires us to integrate the three temporal moments of the past, present, and future. As Cassirer writes, "It is this temporal differentiation and integration which first gives to action its spiritual imprint, which demands free movement and at the same time requires that this movement be unswervingly directed toward the unity of a goal."[96] This characteristic kind of temporality, where past, present and future are integrated, and in which all of our actions unfold, Cassirer calls historical time. Thus historical time is the precondition for meaningful action, but equally for meaningful perception. Indeed all perception, as we have seen, requires some minimal form of action, such as the moving of one's hand over a surface or the direction of one's gaze toward an object. Indeed, all action is also formative in the sense that it creates forms. But not only does it create forms external to us—things like tables, houses, and equally literature and scientific theory—but also action is always self-formative. To act, and hence to brings about changes in one's past, present and future, is always also to change one's own form and meaning. Thus Cassirer writes,

> The true intuition of time cannot be gained in mere recollective memory, but is at the same time knowledge and act: the process in which life takes on form, life in the spiritual not merely biological sense, and that process in which life comes to conceive and know itself—these two must eventually constitute a unity, and hence this conceiving is not the merely external apprehension of a finished and ready form into which life has been squeezed but is the very way life gives itself form in order that in this act of form giving, this formative activity, it may understand itself.[97]

[96] PSF v. 3, 184.
[97] PSF v. 3, 190.

We have now seen that the all perceptual experience is meaningful because of symbolic pregnance—the simultaneity of the integrative and differentiative aspects in perception—and that such meaning arises only on the basis of a sensitive body engaged in action through the mode of temporality called historical time. We have also suggested that all action is equally a process of self-formation. In the next chapter, we turn to see how the relationship that Cassirer sees as maintaining between life and spirit is a defining relationship for human nature and that it is centered around this self-forming character of all activity.

Chapter 3: The Formative Power of Life and Spirit

Cassirer conceives of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* as a project of uncovering the "riddle of the becoming of form," concerned specifically with "the dynamics of the giving of meaning, in and through which the growth and delimitation of specific spheres of being and meaning occur in the first place."[98] As such, the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is a study of the ways in which our symbolic interactions with our world give rise to increasingly greater and more complex determinations of meaning and objective form. For Cassirer, the symbolic is what makes all of our thought, knowledge, action and culture possible. Language, technology, religion and scientific knowledge all depend on symbols and the symbolic function that inheres in them. As we suggested at the conclusion of the previous chapter, all formation of cultural objects is predicated upon a process of self-formation. In this chapter we will show how Cassirer's notion of life is such that it is inherently self-formative, by virtue of its intimate relationship with Geist.

3.1 Cassirer's Metaphysics of Life and Spirit

Does Cassirer have a metaphysics? This question was taken up by many of Cassirer's early commentators, including those published in the Library of Living Philosophers volume on Ernst Cassirer.[99] Among those writers, who would have been unaware of the existence of the manuscript for *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, the majority opinion is that Cassirer did not have a metaphysics and further, that he rejected metaphysics outright. For example, Hendrik Pos writes, "As a critic Cassirer was as ill deposed to metaphysics as toward that irrationalism which stirred mightily in Germany

[98] PSF 4 p. 4
[99] *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, 1949.

between the two world wars."[100] But the significance of the question of Cassirer's metaphysics is greater than simply whether he held one or not. Rather, it cuts to the heart of his philosophy, as William Curtis Swabey realized, arguing that not only did Cassirer reject metaphysics but, moreover, that Cassirer therefore also rejected a fundamental reality. For Cassirer, Swabey wrote, "there is no self-existent nature of which we have real but imperfect knowledge;…there is progress toward comprehensiveness and consistency, but no progressive revelation of a reality which is there, whether known or not."[101] In fact, Cassirer does believe in a reality independent of man and made this plain at a lecture at Yale. "The ego, the individual mind, cannot create reality. Man is surrounded by a reality that he did not make, that he has to accept as an ultimate fact."[102]

It is unsurprising that most early commentators held that Cassirer completely rejects metaphysics, since Cassirer himself regularly cautions about the dangers of metaphysical thinking. When Cassirer does take metaphysical positions into account, he typically does so in order to point out how they have obscured the true nature of the matter at hand, often by falsely taking one concept as representative of all of being and thereby creating innumerable aporias and antinomies.

> The naïve realism of the ordinary view of the world, like the realism of dogmatic metaphysics, falls into this error, ever again. It separates out of the totality of possible concepts of reality a single one and sets it up as a norm and pattern for all the others. Thus certain necessary formal points of view, from which we seek to judge and understand the world of phenomena, are made into things, into absolute beings. Whether we characterize this ultimate being as "matter" or "life," "nature" or "history," there always results for us in the end confusion in our view of the world, because certain spiritual functions, that cooperate in its construction, are excluded and others are over-emphasized.[103]

[100] The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer, pp. 66-67.
[101] Swabey, "Cassirer and Metaphysics", p. 148.
[102] Cassirer, "Language and Art II," p. 195.
[103] SF/ETR, 447.

However, Carl Hamburg, also writing in the 1949 Library of Living Philosophers volume, correctly noted that Cassirer is not dismissive of metaphysics as such, he is simply wary of metaphysics which falsely takes one aspect of reality as representative of all of being. Hamburg, citing a passage from *Substance and Function* in which Cassirer criticizes metaphysics, and then another from an essay on Axel Hägerström in which Cassirer describes metaphysics in a positive light, concludes, "Cassirer's position is thus a consistent one. He does not side with the positivistic contention that metaphysics is not only "false," but also "meaningless." Instead, he distinguishes the genuine character of the *problems* with which the great metaphysicians have dealt, from the still imperfect modes in which their findings have been presented."[104] It is clear that Cassirer did not reject metaphysics out of hand—he simply rejected the false dichotomies often arising from metaphysical thinking. Not surprisingly, we find that Cassirer himself does not hold a metaphysics in the traditional sense. So what are we to make of the posthumously published *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*?

In the preface to the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer alludes to a concluding chapter to that work which, due to the constraints of time and the length of the work, he was unable to include. He indicated that he intended to publish it as part of another critical work, to be titled "*Life and The Human Spirit—toward a Critique of Present-Day Philosophy*."[105] While this work was never published, an essay that Cassirer had written entitled ""Spirit and "Life" in Contemporary Philosophy" subsequently appeared, first in German in 1930, and then in English in 1949.[106] This

[104] Hamburg 1949, p. 117.
[105] PSF 3 p. xvi.
[106] included as the Philosopher's Reply in the volume on Cassirer for the Library of Living Philosophers. Include German and English reference.

essay was assumed to be the concluding chapter to the third volume of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms to which Cassirer had alluded. However, with the publishing of Cassirer's manuscript of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Volume 4: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms* (first in German in 1995 and then in English in 1996) new light has been shed on both Cassirer's metaphysics and on how he viewed the project of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms as a whole. In the course of their inspection of Cassirer's unpublished papers, which had been brought to Yale, Verene and Krois realized that, in fact, the previously published essay thought to be the concluding chapter was, in fact, not the one Cassirer had referred to. The actual concluding chapter had been grouped with other materials, in varying stages of completion, and was intended to eventually comprise a fourth volume of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, entitled "The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms." It is to the first chapter of that now published volume, the chapter entitled "Life and Geist" that we now turn.

The *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, in its task of reconstructing language, myth and theoretical knowledge from their logical beginnings to their complete elaboration, brought to light the various differentiations created both within and between the symbolic forms. In the *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer now asks, "should not these differences at the same time refer us to an overarching whole which embraces them all, as aspects, and connects them together?"[107] Cassirer is not speaking here of any sort of "leveling off" between the forms—of any attempt to reduce them all to a single characteristic—instead he wishes to preserve their differences while at the same time searching for what unites them. In searching for the basis of this connection, we should keep in mind that the symbolic forms were not separated as if "they were cut off with an

[107] PSF v.4, 5.

axe,"[108] but were rather shown to have an essential relation to one and other. Not only could language not develop without mythical thought, just as theoretical knowledge could not develop without language, additionally each form instantiates the symbolic functions of expression, representation and signification in various ways and to varying degrees. As Cassirer writes, "The actual "concrete" reality of Geist consists rather in the fact that all its different basic aspects mesh with one another and coalesce, that, in the true sense of the word, they are "concrescent.""[109] Therefore, in order to seek the unity of the forms we must go back to that realm of concrete lived experience in which we find "creative subjectivity" at work. To aid in this task Cassirer proposes a new direction of inquiry—a turning away from the finished products of the symbolic forms toward the way in which they came to be produced. It is by considering symbolic form in this regard that we will be able to see their unity as a unity of origin. (This unity of origin is what Cassirer's metaphysics fundamentally consists.) In the original three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* each symbolic form represented a progressive breaking away from the immediacy of Life and immediate experience. Spirit, on the other hand, was what was seen as a creating force. But these two concepts and the relation between them were not made fully explicit. But now, in the *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, Life, Spirit and the relation that persists between them have become the central issues. It is Cassirer's metaphysics of Life and Spirit of which we must now give an account.

Cassirer regards the project of the symbolic forms as uncovering the "riddle of the becoming of form"—form which is meaningful and which achieves a degree of validity not just for an individual, but equally between individuals. As we will see, Cassirer's

[108] PSF 4 p. 7
[109] PSF 4 7

metaphysics of Life and Spirit is therefore an account of the two directions of force, the originary difference that gives rise to the symbolic forms. Therefore our elucidation of what Cassirer means by "Life" and "Spirit," and the relation between the two, is by no means a simple matter of definition. In fact, no definition can be given for one independently of the other, because Life and Spirit cannot be conceived as two substantially different things. They are not opposite poles of Being—they are simply functionally different. Life and Spirit are intimately bound up in the process of the becoming of form, and show themselves only in and through that process. Moreover, neither is ever fully revealed through that process. Therefore, to understand Cassirer's conception of Life and Spirit, we must observe it in action. But at the outset of our analysis we can, at least provisionally, draw some distinctions to aid us in our understanding, even if these distinctions are effaced as we move forward.

Life is, first and foremost, a biological principle that we share with all other animals. Life is manifest in a body that exists in an immediate relation to its environment. Life has the character of being-in-itself, it is immersed and enclosed within its immanent actuality, and does not grasp the world, nor itself, as an object. The world of life is a world of undifferentiated immediacy. The world of Spirit, on the other hand, is characterized by differentiation and mediation. Where life is common to all animals, Spirit is something cultural and uniquely human. Spirit is able to hold the world at a distance and grasp it "objectively." Unlike Life, Spirit has the character of being-for-itself, it is self-conscious and able to reflect on itself. Life, as immediate and unselfconsciously immersed in its immanent actuality, seems to be what we associate with animals. On the other hand Spirit, as mediated and capable of reflecting both upon

its world and itself, appears to be characteristically human. But we should be careful not to assume that Spirit is something simply added to the otherwise animal aspect of human life, something over, above and different from it. As we saw in the first chapter, human life is already distinct form animal life by virtue of it symbolic distance. Therefore Cassirer writes "The formative activity of the spirit, as demonstrated in its supreme creations—in the creation of language and myth, religion, art, cognition—is a continuation and sublimation of the formative activity of nature: spiritual form does not conflict with organic form but is rather the fulfillment, the maturest fruit of the organic process itself."[110] Here we begin to get a sense from Cassirer's description that life and spirit are opposed, yet commensurable. They seem to be both different and identical. We get a sense of this identity and difference at the outset of Cassirer's review of Simmel's metaphysics of life.

Simmel characterizes human life as that in which "transcendence is immanent." In that characterization life is itself a form which has the power to build new forms and to incorporate those into itself. As such, it has the ability to transcend itself. Obviously, already in this description we are no longer dealing with simple animal life, but life which is also *of spirit*. The immanence of life consists in its actuality and in its immediate absorption into its environment—into nature. But for Simmel, that immanence is only one of life's aspects. The other is life's transcendence, which consists in its never being wholly exhausted in its actuality. "As little as life can ever change its character, since this very change itself remains *its* work and its own activity, so it too can never be wholly absorbed in any of its forms, conceived as a closed and compete totality…It is never at

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[110] PSF 3 38

one with itself except by being beyond itself at the same time."[111] In other words, the actuality of human Life is that it is always potentially more that what it is actually. Life, therefore has its transcendence as an immanence to the degree that its determinate actuality possess the potentiality to change what it itself is. Its self-identity is that it is self-differentiating. Spirit shares with life this character of a self-identity that is self-differentiating.

To be sure, life is bound up in its biological existence and as such has the character of "being-in-itself and remaining in itself." For such a being "possesses its content and its meaning only as part of this process of life itself, not as something opposed to it or in any way approaching it from outside."[112] However, unlike the *lebensphilosophie* which Cassirer argues against, the concept of life is not exhausted by its biological immanence. Human life is also characterized by the character of transcendence, which, at first, appears to be in contradiction with its immanence, but is in fact bound up with it. Having the character of transcendence bound up with immanence means that an essential characteristic of life is that it strives to overcome its actuality, its current form. Life is at once a determinate actuality and a potentiality. This striving, this desire to transcend itself is immanent in human life. Hence, Simmel summarizes, "Life is at once flux without pause and yet something enclosed in bearers and contents, formed about midpoints, individualized, and therefore always a bounded form which continually jumps its bounds. That is its essence."[113] For Cassirer, this dual nature of life—as bounded yet capable of transcending its boundaries—is "not only the original source of

[111] PSF v.4, 9.
[112] PSF v.4, 9.
[113] PSF v.4, 9.

geist but also its archetype and prototype."[114] Therefore, the "turn to life" that characterizes Simmel's metaphysics necessarily involves a "turn to the idea." For Simmel, Cassirer notes, the two are inseparably bound up.

> This consists for him in the fact that what appeared at first to be a pure creation of life, to be integrated into and at the service of its continuing course, is not bound exclusively to this state of affairs, but rather proves to have its own significance and autonomous meaning. The realm of the "idea" is made accessible to us and arises for us by the forms and functions that life has brought about for its own sake, out of its own dynamics to become independent and definite…only after this change has taken place do the great intellectual categories, which previously seemed passive in contrast to life, become productive in the true sense;[115]

Life, in its process of creating form, endows this form with a meaning and significance which transcends the immediate meaning of the life which created it. The process through which life achieves form is therefore not one of life "jumping over its own shadow." There is no such thing as pure life without form. Life is itself formed from the outset and as such life and form are not polar opposites in being, they are simply two accents we fix in the process of becoming.

To clarify this processes of the becoming of form, Cassirer uses the example of language. The becoming of form is never the giving of a fixed and final form, the symbolic forms take their significance and vitality from their process of becoming. In language, for example, we can at first view the creative process as being opposed to the forms that are therein created. Specifically, the process of creating meaning seems opposed to the limitations imposed by the grammatical rules and structure inherent in language. But Cassirer urges us, as mentioned in the first chapter, to follow Humboldt in conceiving language not as *ergon*, as a product, but as *energeia*, an activity or power, a potentiality, "not merely something which has become what it is, but which is

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[114] PSF v. 4, 10.
[115] PSF v.4, 13.

continuously shaping itself."[116] Language only ever exists in its specific determinations, in the act of speech or writing. But at the same time language is never wholly present in any of its determinations, its power is never exhausted in an individual act of language, nor in the aggregate of all individual language acts. Rather we must understand the speech act as the creation of a meaning, which did not exist prior to the act. Therefore Cassirer writes,

> 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. The speech act is never in this sense an act of mere assimilation; rather, it is, in however small a way, a creative act, an act of shaping and reshaping. It is a completely one-sided and insufficient conception of this act to regard it as though the subject was inhibited and constricted at every turn and with every step by a world of forms as something already present, as though it had to struggle against them to make its way. Here the form does not prove to be such an impediment, but an organ that is always ready, in fact an organ whose value rests on its being modifiable and mutable in the highest measure.[117]

The processes of linguistic creation involves a coming up against the determinations of language, such that one might imagine language as being a constraint on the expression and creation of meaning—constrained by vocabulary and the determinate grammatical rules. But in fact these determinations within language, while constraining, are equally the condition for the possibility of the creation of new meaning. Cassirer raises the example of Goethe, but we could take any poet. We can imagine the poet struggling, not being able to quite express what she wants. Nevertheless, eventually, after trying many combinations of words and images, discovers through some mystery of genius a new way of expressing her intention. In such a situation, the grammatical rules and constraints of language were first seen to be a limitation, but then proved to be "a pure formative

[116] PSF v.4, 16.
[117] PSF 4 16

energy with an unlimited openness"[118] that made the expression of a genuinely new meaning possible. This dual nature of spiritual products, to be both limiting and limitless, to simultaneously constrict and open up possibilities, is not an irresolvable contradiction, but an essential and mutually supporting aspect of spirit. "This creation would have to be evanescent, would have to disappear like a breath into the air, if in the midst of its rise and development it did not meet with something that was already developed. This is not mere "matter" for it, but a product of and a witness to the same forces that brought it about."[119] In other words, the possibility of the creation of form and menaing, is that we always encounter some existing form and meaning which can itself be used and reshaped by spirit.

This idea is expressed by Cassirer when he writes that form is always form-that-is-becoming. It is, as he says, an interplay between *forma formans* (form forming) and *forma formata* (form already formed) that creates spiritual life itself. "The *forma formans* that becomes *forma formata*, which it must become for the sake of its own self-preservation without ever becoming redued to it, retains the power to regain itself from it, to be born again as *forma formans*—this is what is distinctive of the development of geist and culture."[120] In other words, the process of creating form yields a form which has been created and that new creation itself is therefore capable of creating ever new forms. This continual process is that through which Spirit develops itself.

All meaning must retain this "vital" quality, that of a continual becoming. Life, in the process of giving form and creating meaning, "comes to itself" through a process of self-differentiation.

[118] PSF v.4, 18.
[119] PSF v.4, 18.
[120] PSF v.4, 19.

> So, if we see it in the mirror of the "symbolic forms," the turn to the idea" cannot be described as life bidding itself farewell in order to go forth into something foreign and distant from itself; rather, life must be seen as returning to itself, it "comes to itself" in the medium of the symbolic forms. It possess and grasps itself in the imprint of form as the infinite possibility of formation, as the will to form and power to form. Even life's limitation becomes its own act; what from outside seems to be its fate, its necessity, proves to be a witness to its freedom and self-formation.[121]

Life gives itself limitations and rules, but in taking up these rules into itself is able to create new possibilities. This involves a process of activity which transforms these rules from something external and alien, to something which has become part of life itself, become a new potentiality.

Looking back on the road we have travelled up to now and seeing how form and life are intertwined, Cassirer poses a question. "The question appears in the end to consist not in whether form is capable of movement but whether the kind of mobility that takes place in and through form is up to the pure mobility of life and can accord with it. Does the turn to form mean an intensification of this pure motility of life, or does it not, rather, really mean its slackening and degeneration?"[122] As Cassirer notes, in the romantics as well as in modern metaphysics of lebensphilosopie, the world of life on the one hand is irreconcilably set off from the world of form and spirit on the other, such that any progress in the realm of spirit is a move away from the realm of life. So the question remains, is the finitude of life opposed to the infinity of Spirit? Spirit, Cassirer says, is an undifferentiated and infinite primordial ground from which specific, definite and, therefore, limited configurations arise. But these finite products do not stand in opposition to the infinity of Spirit, because these products are themselves not simply

[121] PSF v. 4, 19.
[122] PSF v. 4, 23.

products, as *forma formata*, but are also energies, potential and material of new forms, *forma formans*. Thus Cassirer writes,

> The infinity which is denied to the finished configuration lives in the pure process of configuration. This does not become solidified in any individual creation, because it is the eternally productive act…The law of meaning to which it is subject and by virtue of which it is continually reborn—not what is created from it—provides its true content. If this law 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, geist in all of its productivity always stands opposed to life without ever turning against it, without ever being antagonistic toward it." [123]

Thus the products of spirit are not the true content of Spirit, but rather the law of meaning is. Spirit, as this law of meaning, can only be active by entering and constantly resubmerging itself into life. Spirit is opposed to life, but it is not antagonistic toward life, it does not seek to destroy life. Spirit continually pulls life from its immanence, but must continually return life to its immanence. They are each the fulfillment of the other. Therefore we cannot understand Life in its fullness if it is taken in abstraction from Spirit, nor can we fully understand Spirit taken in abstraction from Life. But Life and Spirit do not form a simple identity, they are also essentially different from each other. Therefore, to the extent that we cannot fully grasp one without the other, so too we cannot fully grasp their unity without knowledge of their essential difference.

3.2 Conclusion

In this chapter we saw that Cassirer conceives of life and spirit as concepts which are intimately bound up with each other, such that one cannot be understood separately from the other. We saw that the body, and the biological existence to which life is bound, in

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[123] PSF 4 p. 31

one sense cuts life off from the infinite world of spirit. However, on the other hand, life is body and limitation, its being determined in some form, is also that in virtue of which it is able to create new forms and participate in spirit. Correspondingly, we saw that spirit is on the one hand an infinite and limitless realm of meaning, but that its essence and meaning can only ever be expressed in the limited nature of form. Most importantly, we also saw that all form—whether it be language or to life itself—is both *forma formans* and *forma formata*, that is, form which exists as a product, but equally form which is itself the capacity to produce new form, that is, form forming. This is the same insight we expressed in the previous chapter as the conception of symbolic form as an enegia, an energy or potential. Let us now attempt to bring together the three chapters. But first let us remind ourselves of the characterization that Heidegger gave of Cassirer's philosophy:

> I believe that what I describe by Dasein does not allow translation into a concept of Cassirer's. Should one say consciousness, that is precisely what I rejected. What I call Dasein is essentially codetermined—not just through what we describe as spirit, and not just through what we call living. Rather, it depends on the original unity and the immanent structure of the relatedness of a human being, which to a certain extent has been fettered in a body and which, in the fetteredness in the body, stands in a particular condition of being bound up with beings. In the midst of this it finds itself, not in the sense of a spirit that gazes down upon it, but rather in the sense that Dasein, thrown into the midst of beings, carries out as free an incursion into entities, an incursion that is always historical and, in the ultimate sense, contingent.[124]

In the introduction we said that, contrary to Heidegger's characterization, we would show that Cassirer's philosophy entailed a conception of the human subject that is an essential unity, whose embodiment and historical temporality are the conditions for the possibility of meaning and action. Let us trace back through the path we have taken a build up this picture of Cassirer's conception of the human subject.

[124] Gordon, *Continental Divde*, 194-195.

In the first Chapter we argued that Cassirer's conception of human life is centered around the symbol. We saw that Cassirer rejected reason as the all-encompassing determinate of human life and instead turned toward the symbol as the basic principle of human culture. We further saw in Cassirer's description of humanity as *animal symbolicum* that this turn to the symbolic resulted in not only a reinterpretation of human culture, but equally a new model of the character of human life. We then saw that human use of the symbol creates a symbolic distance which gives us the power to build up a cultural world. In the second section we demonstrated how Cassirer's conception of the symbolic in general is based in life. We saw how Cassirer's definition of the symbol was not restricted to artificial, cultural products, but that it equally encompasses the natural symbolism that we find in perception and anyway meaning is present. We then saw that, contrary to the general trend, Cassirer did not base his conception of the symbol on language. Cassirer viewed the symbolic form of myth as primary and ultimately based his conception of the symbolic in the realm of life, refereeing to the body-soul relationship as the "model and prototype" for all symbolic relations.

In the second chapter we argued that empiricist, rationalist and Kantian theories of perception all failed to explain how the material and ideal come together in perception to present us with meaningful experience. We saw that since both began from the assumption that the material and ideal aspects of perception are originally separate, neither the empiricist theory of the association of impressions, nor the rationalist theory of judgment was able to fully explain how they are reunited. We then saw that Kant made an advance over each of these theories by placing the perceiving subject, rather than the perceived object, at the centre of the problem. Although Kant tried to incorporate both the

empiricist demand for the receptivity of the senses and the rationalist demand for the spontaneity of the mind, he nevertheless failed to fully bridge the gap by merely installing these disparate aspects into different faculties, rather than truly affecting a unification. We then turned in the second section to see how Cassirer's notion of symbolic pregnance constitutes his solution to the problem of perception. We saw that symbolic pregnance, with its origins in both Leibniz and Gestalt psychology, entails both the sense of the fecundity of particular perceptual contents—their necessary reference to other particulars and to the whole of perception—as well as the sense of the structuring of perception around particulars which are taken as constants and endowed with a meaning. We saw that each particular of perception served as both a differential and an integral of perception and that this was the condition for the possibility of meaningful perceptive experience. We then concluded that symbolic pregnance could not stand entirely on its own, put required our sensitive, embodied nature as well as a historical temporality to allow us to undertake meaningful action. In other words, we demonstrated that Cassirer relies on a conception of humanity which, contrary to Heidegger's opinion, recognizes the essentially embodied and temporal nature of humanity.

Finally, in the third chapter, we saw that the relationship between life and spirit is one which serves as the condition for the possibility of human progress from the finitude of its actuality, its current form, to the infinitude of its potentiality. However, in keeping with the insight of Cassirer's notion of *forma formans* and *forma formata*, this striving toward spirit is always limited by life. This life, is precisely the finite, embodied, temporal life which we sought to explicate in the previous chapters. Cassirer, in suggesting that humanity is constituted by both life and spirit, is not suggesting that we

stem from an original dichotomy as Heidegger suggests. Rather, we are an original unity in which “The dissonant is in harmony with itself; the contraries are not mutually exclusive, but interdependent: “harmony in contrariety, as in the case of the bow and the lyre.”[125]

[125] EM, 228.

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