

Phenomenological Idealism as Method: The Hidden Completeness of Cassirer's Matrix of the Symbolic

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I. Phenomenological Idealism as Method

Introduction

Ernst Cassirer's *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (PSF)* is a philosophy of *mediation*, and according to Cassirer, this philosophy's task is to determine what culture is. Unlike animal life, human life is permeated by "energ[ies] of spirit" (*BSF* 79 [76]) that, on the one hand, emerge from organic life and, on the other hand, stand radically opposed to it, as it is most evident in what we call cognition, or, as the system of this cognition: science. Hence, humans are incapable of *immediately* taking hold of what their life form as such truly is. Instead, such determination necessarily needs to be expressed, hence to be mediated, through forms of human culture. Ultimately, any true philosophy depends on the spiritually formed as medium, thereby mediating the immediate. This leaves us with the insight that Cassirer's method is *idealistic* in important respects. But how could his idealism be defended today, and what role could scientific statements play in such an idealism?

The answers to those questions can be found by reflecting on the *connections between symbolic functions and symbolic forms*. Culture comes in different ways, such as science, art, religion, and so forth. But what would be a philosophy of culture if it shall amount to more than just the historicity of those forms, which in the end would just stand side by side? According to the *PSF*, particular forms of culture "express a common

ideal content" (*PSF* I, 14 [14]), but to define this unity confronts us with a methodological dilemma: to insist on a logical form of all forms (of culture) would mean to erase each form's individuality and "the particular nature of its principle" (*ibid.*), whilst clinging to this individuality would mean to lose sight of all universality. Cassirer's approach to this dilemma, and hence the program of his principal works, is to look out for an "an element that is repeatedly found in each basic spiritual form and yet which recurs in none of them as such in the same shape" (*ibid.*). Such a factor can only be an *ideal* relation between the concrete empirical sides of each cultural form, because it is supposed to prove a certain unity in multiplicity. Being unable to establish this unity empirically, we could also say that Cassirer's task is to search for a method to prove the unity of the several empirical forms of culture. From a methodological point of view, it therefore has to be achieved on ideal grounds. But those ideal grounds do not fall from the sky. The only way to make visible such ideal relations is by an analytical approach in determining the relation between subject and object, between mind and world. Therefore, the discovery of symbolic forms as ideal forms of our cultural world presupposes an analysis of the spiritual or mental *functions* they originate from.

Given that empiricism cannot mediate the concrete and the universal¹, Cassirer sees only two ways of tackling the problem: the critical and the speculative solution. Both differ in the concept they presuppose of the universal, and hence of the logical system in which each notion of universality has its place. The speculative solution tries to establish a synthetic universal. That means to install a single original principle from which the totality of all particular cultural forms could be deduced. The problem Cassirer sees here is that this method limits itself to only *one* starting and *one* end point, and thereby threatens the variety of culture. Both points might be mediated by a logical

¹ According to Cassirer, empiricism gets its own wires crossed by confusing the empirical and the factual. The latter is already theory-laden and hence not purely empirical, while the former has to find its way into theory by a phenomenological description of the given (cf. *PSF* III, 248).

principle, but such a method cannot behold *unity in multiplicity*. Against this idea, the critical method aims at justifying the analytic universal: here, “we content ourselves with combining the manifold of possible forms of connection into the highest concept of a system and, thus, *subordinating* them to determine fundamental laws” (*PSF I*, 26-27 [26]).

Cassirer’s methodology, as a consequence, is necessarily a combination of phenomenological and idealistic approaches to culture. Firstly, the findings of the empirical sciences (such as linguistics, ethnology, anthropology, religious studies, and so forth) have to be described without adapting the empirical method to philosophy itself. Then, secondly, a guiding principle to logically group this material has to be found. Eventually, this approach leads Cassirer to what he calls a “complex system” (*ibid.*) of culture that shares strong similarities with Kant’s notion of an architectonics of pure reason. For Cassirer and his contemporaries, the question of idealism has a strong anti-metaphysical stance and to a large extent opposes the idea of a system as conceived in German Idealism. On the other hand, Cassirer expands Kant’s method of transcendental idealism towards a phenomenological idealism that initially encompasses all cultural forms before logically arranging them.

It is noteworthy that finding unity in multiplicity means that the intended systematic unity in cognition “stands [...] at the end rather than at the beginning” (*PSF II*, 15 [15]) of Cassirer’s investigations. This is necessary since the critical approach demands – rather than to conclude functional unity from a unitary metaphysical substrate – to “begin from the function as such” (*ibid.*). If then a symbolic function (such as the expressive, presentative², or significative) can be determined through a “relatively constant ‘inner form’” (*ibid.*), we can still not conclude the unity of the human spirit and of cultural forms in a *substantial* way, but in a constitutive. i.e. functional way. Uni-

² Here, I follow a new translation that has been first presented by Samantha Matherne (cf. MATHERNE 2018, 151, fn46) and will be integral for Stephen Lofts’ new translation of *PSF*.

ty, in this sense, is not a grounding force in the metaphysical or empirical sense of the term, yet it is the “*expression* of this same determinacy of form” (*ibid.*) and consequently a symbolic form.

Lastly, a preliminary remark on the relation between symbolic functions and symbolic forms is necessary to draw conclusions concerning the *completeness* of Cassirer’s system of symbolic formation: there is no such thing as a “symbolic ability *per se*” (*PSF* III, 319 [314]). The presentation of Cassirer’s methodology above has made clear that any substance-laden understanding of the symbolical has no place in his philosophy, because its goal is not to find “similarities in *being*” but “similarities in *sense*” (*ibid.*)

1. *The Methodological Claim*

In light of the above, this paper seeks to defend two principal theses: (1) The three symbolic functions (expressive, presentative, purely signficative), as presented in volume three of *PSF*, are a *complete* presentation of all symbolic functionality. Together with the three phases of symbolic formation (mimetic, analogical, symbolic), as presented in volume one, they form a matrix that encompasses the totality of humanity’s spiritual, i.e. cultural, life³. Though Cassirer’s system is open for new symbolic *forms*, this matrix, as well the corresponding symbolic forms myth, language, and cognition, constitute the *extrema* of all symbolic formation. That is to say that there are no symbolic functions or phases other than that and that every symbolic form that is not myth, language, or cognition is a hybrid of the mentioned functions whilst the paradigmatic three are a sort of pure modality of their underlying functionality. (2) Cassirer’s methodology as set out above sheds light on the genesis of culture. Although Cassirer is quite clear that a purely genet-

³ In the following, I will refer to the *phases* or *stages* of symbolic forms (mimetic, analogical, symbolic) as (S1) and to the *dimensions* of the symbolic or simply the differentiated symbolic functions of expression, presentation, and pure signification as (S2), in which S stands for “schema”.

ic approach to e.g. language is philosophically unsatisfactory and methodologically hopelessly misguided (cf. *EM* 126 [150]), there is room for a genealogical perspective on the development of culture.

II. *The Two Schemata of Symbolic Functions and Stages as a Theory of Representation*

1. *Presentation and Problematization of the Schemata*

It is widely known that Cassirer presents his readers with two tripartite schemata in the *PSF* that have puzzled Cassirer scholars ever since. In the first volume, (S1) is introduced, and it is supposed to characterize three developmental stages, or rather phases, of language (cf. *PSF* I, 133-146). Already at this early juncture I want to indicate that such a development cannot be understood in a *genetic* sense, because the overall idea of *PSF* consists in a structural or rather functional analysis of such forms. That is to say, it is not the substantial or material side of e.g. language that is Cassirer's object of investigation, but an ideal type of language. But how could Cassirer come up with such an ideal type if his method is not speculative (like Hegel's), but rather empirical? It is important to see that (S1) is designed to be able to integrate empirical findings from such fields as comparative linguistics, phonology, psychology, and so on, with the *development* of language in mind (both with respect to ontogenetic and phylogenetic observations). It surely is on behalf of Cassirer's interest to at least outline how speech (and later writing) *progresses* from prehistory to modern history. His approach, hence, is *genealogical, but not genetic*. This difference is of great importance in order to understand Cassirer's method. The analysis of forms does not proceed causally, like any empirical research would take place (i.e. genetically). It nonetheless incorporates scientific findings and scientific theories as a touchstone of its own correctness (and thus pays heed to the genealogical method). Furthermore, there is a historical and dialectical side to the stages and

phases Cassirer mentions that I will discuss later on⁴.

Book three of the *PSF* is structured by another schema that subdivides “the *general* function of sign-bestowing” (*PSF* II, 228 [232]) into three symbolic functions. Together they form a second trio: Expression-Presentation-(pure) Signification. Before the release of volume three, such as is widely known⁵, the symbolic function as such was alternately referred to as the “basic function of signifying” (*PSF* I, 39-40 [39]) or as the “General Function of Signs” (*PSF* I, 15 [15]), and even more specifically: as the “originary-function of representation” (*PSF* I, 32 [31]). However, it is less known that Cassirer further differentiates this function of symbolism two years *before* the last volume of his *magnum opus* appears. It is in June 1927, at the *III. Kongreß für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* (Halle, Germany) where Cassirer introduces “a very broad relational system of thought, according to which we can describe and ascertain the ‘orientation’ of each symbolic form” (*SSP* 259 [261]). I claim that by this time the *PSF* had already undergone a massive structural realignment. Here, I cannot argue in detail for how such realignment took place and what it means for Cassirer’s theory as a whole⁶. However, by making a rather obvious point, I can extend the common conception of this change a bit more. As it has been recognized previously⁷, just a quick gaze at the contents of volume three makes it immediately visible that the book is structured along the three symbolic functions – that of expression, of presentation, and of (pure) signification. A closer look reveals that part one and two of the book deal, in substance, with most of the systematic results of book one and two (just in reversed order): myth and language⁸. But furthermore, I would argue for the idea that the *PSF* essentially contains a theory of representation (and of perception) in the sense that any act of objectification, of grasping an object, is an act of

⁴ See part II.4.

⁵ Cf. RECKI 2004, 59-64.

⁶ I have argued for this view extensively in my dissertation (ENDRES 2020).

⁷ Cf. BÖSCH 2002, 148-161; VAN VLIET 2013, 50-83.

⁸ I have shown this in more detail elsewhere (ENDRES 2016, 49-53).

symbolization and that is to say of *representation in the widest sense possible*. Representation, hence, is a manifold sign-like relation between certain ways of using, perceiving, and forming the material inventory of our world, and their corresponding worldview.

Now, I want to draw attention to two major objections that stand against the presented schemata. Some scholars have argued that (S1) and (S2) more or less coincide⁹, that (S2) simply replaces (S1), because (S2) is a more mature version of (S1). Birgit Recki convincingly argues that such a reading is mistaken (Recki 2004, 47-48) and I agree with her view. The conceptual shift from volumes one and two to volume three would not at all be intelligible, if Cassirer would already have had the same instrument with (S1) than he had after having developed (S2)¹⁰. But beyond that, Recki also argues that both schemata are inconsistent *ad hoc* constructions and can hence be neglected (Recki 2004, 48, fn33). I think that this conclusion goes too far, and it will be integral for my following reasoning to show why I think that it is wrong to neglect this part of Cassirer's theory. Recki raises two strong objections: if both schemata are meaningful constructions, so her argument goes, then there have to be intersections. The two schemata have to be interwoven: if there is a mimetic, an analogical and a symbolic phase of language, then there has to be a similar development in myth and in science (Recki 2004, 48, fn33). I agree with Recki here. (1) Now, the first objection says that there cannot be a (purely) symbolic phase in myth, because myth and knowledge are mutually exclusive¹¹. Both contradict each other on a theoretical and a practical level (Kreis 2010, 330). (2) The second objection goes against the idea of science in its mimetic phase: concept formation in the sciences has ever since been feeding on natural languages and not just on formal languages such as mathematics

⁹ For a detailed overview cf. BEVC 2005, 52, fn125.

¹⁰ Recki furthermore argues that such a reading is incompatible with Cassirer's theory of art (RECKI 2004, 47).

¹¹ It seems Cassirer himself is supporting this view (cf. PSF III, 87).

or logics¹². Cassirer adds that this might have always been the case, since “In this process, however, it [scientific concept formation T.E.] cannot jump over its own shadow” (*PSF* III, 555 [553]). But how could science possibly integrate elements that stem from mythical thinking?

Those are two powerful arguments to support Recki’s view, but I will nonetheless defend the indispensability of Cassirer’s model. This implies to show that those arguments do not attain their goal.

2. *Schema 1: Mimetic, Analogical, (Purely) Symbolic*

(S1) is introduced in the second chapter of the first volume of the *PSF* (*PSF* I, 137). This chapter deals with *Language in the Phase of Sensuous Expression*. In its first part, Cassirer aims at deriving language from basic expressive movements. The second part is named after the schema to be introduced: *Mimetic, Analogical, and Symbolic Expression*. The idea of its construction can be exemplified most easily with reference to the aforementioned genealogical perspective and with having the philosophical problem of a *diremption* (*Entzweiung*) of *mind and world* in view:

Indeed, a continuous transition thus seems to lead genetically and actually from “grasping” [*Greifen*] to “comprehending” [*Begreifen*]. Sensate-physical grasping becomes sensual interpretation; however, the latter already contains the first approach toward the higher functions of signification as they emerge in language and thinking. To measure the extreme range of this opposition, we might say that the sensible extreme of mere “showing” [*Weisen*] stands over against the logical extreme of “demonstration” [*Beweisen*] (*PSF* I, 127 [128])¹³.

¹² I have strengthened the objection at this point, because Recki does not recognize this fact as a possible interpretation of the sciences in the phase of analogical thinking (cf. RECKI 2004, 48, fn33).

¹³ Here, Manheim’s translation is flawed: “Sensory-physical grasping becomes sensory interpretation [...]” must be translated as “Sensate-physical grasping becomes sensual pointing to [...]”.

Cassirer wants to show that there is a *natural* transition from the active orientation of living organisms to a first *meaningful* acquisition of world through humans and higher animals. Stimulus-response-movements transform naturally to expressive movements. Subsequently, such prototypes of linguistic behavior take a route that is beyond natural laws, leading *dialectically* from the imitation of natural processes to an abstract juxtaposition of those processes in form of a 'knowledge-that'. As said before, schematically sketching such a development comes with an ideal-typical claim: Cassirer wants to entangle genetic and structural aspects of language such that his object of investigation – an ideal form – is not an object of speculation. The reality of language as a symbolic form becomes apparent through the integration of empiric knowledge about language into a non-empiric theory. In Cassirer's words:

In general, language can be shown to have passed through three sequential stages [*Stufen*] in maturing to its proper form, in achieving its inner self-emancipation. If we designate these stages [*Stufen*] as mimetic expression, analogical expression, and truly symbolic expression, then this tripartite division contains at first nothing more than an abstract schema; however, this schema fills with concrete content [*Gehalt*] to the extent that it is shown not only that it can serve as a principle of classification of given linguistic phenomena but also that the functional lawfulness of the *construction* of language that is exhibited in it has its very determinate and characteristic counterpart in other domains, such as art or cognition (*PSF* I, 137 [136]).

Let me summarize these three stages to present this part of Cassirer's methodology more clearly. (1) Mimetic expression within the development of language is best exemplified in sign language. Just like spoken language, sign language is a natural capacity of humans that comes with great variety, but nonetheless enables people to universally express themselves even without having acquired the specifics of a particular sign language. This is only possible because "there is still no true tension between the linguistic 'sign' and the intuitive content to which it refers" (*PSF* II, 277-278 [288]). Both rather tend to "merge

into one another and both strive to cover each other” (*ibid.*). Against this, the characteristic of spoken language is a “distance, a growing difference” between sign and content (*ibid.*). Language finds its authentic form in the analogical stage qualified by the complete “separation of *sound* and *signification*” (*ibid.*). But how do we get there, if the principle of (S1) is not some kind of abstract necessity that could be demonstrated *scientifically* as Hegel would have it¹⁴? It is important to see that Cassirer argues on purely pragmatic grounds: a new phase or stage in language can only be achieved by striving for new possibilities of expression through the use of already existing and formed material. In Cassirer’s words:

Language cannot immediately arrive at this level, but rather here too, it is subject to the same inner law that governs its entire formation and progress. It does not create a new means of expression for every new sphere of signification that is opened up to it; rather, its force consists in its ability to configure a determinate given material in different ways, that it is able, without, in the first instance, changing its content [...] (*PSF I*, 169 [166]).

Hence, we can say more generally that any ideal symbolic progress is bound to manageable *material* means of expression such as already existing phonetic symbols of vocal modulation, characters in stone or written on papyrus, mythic-religious signs in realizable structures such as Stonehenge or a gothic church. The space of meaning, in this widest sense, is therefore constituted purely pragmatically. Cassirer metaphorically describes the enlargement of any means of expression as an “ebb and flow of spirit” (*PSF I*, 262 [259]) within the aforementioned “spheres of signification”. That is to say that such progress in no case takes place compulsorily and linearly. As progress, it nonetheless can be measured against the logic of (S1) from the

¹⁴ The recurring dissociation from Hegel is important within the context of method, because Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* declaredly is Cassirer’s main point of reference, and it has to become clear what Cassirer means when he says that “*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* agrees with the Hegelian approach – however much it must follow another approach in its grounding [*Begründung*] and its implementation” (*PSF III*, ix [xxxiv]).

mimetic via the analogical to the purely symbolic. The vector of progress always points from spirit's boundedness to the sensuous towards its complete self-liberation. Culture is "the process of man's progressive self-liberation" (*EM* 244).

(2) The analogical phase of language establishes representation in its full functionality. But the analogical does not only appear by overcoming the mimetic, but by interaction with sign language. Sign language and spoken language form themselves against each other:

In the historical development of language, this process of detachment does not take place all at once. Even today, in the language of natural peoples, it can be clearly recognized not only how in them the language of gestures continues to exist *alongside* phonetic language but also how it still decisively determines it in its forming [*Formung*]. We find everywhere here this characteristic penetration in accordance with the "word concepts" of these languages, which can be completely comprehended and understood only if they are understood at once as mimetic and "manual concepts". The gesture is so closely connected with the word, the hands with the intellect, that they truly seem to form a part of it. Likewise, in the development of children's speech, the sound only gradually detaches itself from the totality of mimetic movements: even at relatively advanced stages [*Stufen*], it remains embedded in this mimetic totality [*Ganze*] (*PSF* I, 130 [130-131]).

Cassirer claims that the full functionality of spoken language, the true transition from the mimetic to the analogical principle emerges only slowly through more and more subtle differentiations along (S1) *within* the paradigm of the mimetic: in sign language. Then, the paradigm of the analogical, spoken language, takes on the same, but renewed process. This is why in spoken language the mimetic shows up at the origin of its articulation: as onomatopoeia. But it does not stop there, because the principle of the analogical phase – to signify with recourse to something not present but already signified – is already at work. This new freedom of discretion when using signs enables humans to detach themselves from concrete perceptual experiences and to make "an analogy of *form* is apprehended in the relationship of sound, on the one hand, and that of the designated content, on

the other” (PSF I, 141 [139-140]) with the result that “a qualitative gradation in a serial totality [*Gesamtreihe*] of sounds that serves the expression of a pure relation” (*ibid.*). More precisely:

We seem to find ourselves at the lowest step of the spiritual scale where the comparison and correlation of objects [*Objekte*] are based solely on some similarity in the sensible impression that they evoke. [...] The most heterogeneous contents may be combined together into a “class”, provided that they reveal some analogy in their sensibly perceivable form [...] An entirely different level of consideration would even seem to belong to such differentiations of class that are based not on a mere similarity of the *content* of individually perceived things but rather on some determinative relationship of objects [*Objekte*] that are differentiated from one another according to their magnitude, number, position, and location (PSF I, 270-271 [266]).

What we learn from this is that the last phase of purely symbolic expression is already predetermined in the analogical phase, because here only such pure relations constitute meaning. The ambiguity of the linguistic sign itself “will not tolerate that the sign remains a mere individual sign; this ambiguity compels spirit to take the decisive step from the concrete function of ‘designation’ to the general and universally valid function of ‘signification’” (PSF I, 146 [143]). But although language “constantly strives to extend and finally surpass its own sphere” (*ibid.*), it cannot realize this function with its own means.

(3) In a first step, the purely symbolic phase of language can be approached best *ex negativo*: “The more the sound resembles what it expresses, the more it still ‘is’ this other, the less it is able to ‘signify’ it” (PSF I, 136 [136]). Put positively, we can say that the ideal notion of a purely symbolic sign is achieved in mathematics: numbers are the most abstract symbols that humans use. We can then say that the symbolic phase of language might be reached in formal languages like in e.g. Frege’s *Begriffsschrift*. But it is of more importance to see that language itself cannot truly realize purely symbolic meaning. On the one hand, “the numeral [*Zahlzeichen*], which language creates, substitutes [...] the indispensable *presupposition* for the formation

[*Gebilde*] that determines pure mathematics as ‘numbers’” (PSF I, 184 [179]). But on the other hand, “there of course exists between linguistic and purely intellectual symbols an inevitable tension and an *opposition* that can never be fully sublated” (*ibid.*). Genealogically seen, for most of the time the notion of number has been formed by language and might even stem from the “intuition of I, you, and he, from which it detaches only gradually” (PSF I, 205 [195]). But the notion of number of modern mathematics can be no more defined with linguistic concepts, because it belongs to another realm of symbolic functioning. For the mathematician, (S1) *prima facie* might appear worthless, because it seems that there simply is no connection between what is done in modern sciences and an “older magical form of number theory, [...] a science of *almacabala*” (PSF II, 170 [170]). But this would be a misunderstanding of what Cassirer wants to accomplish with (S1). Regarding numbers, the phases mimetic, analogical, purely symbolic are not stages of a causal development of the concept of number, but the (genealogical) conditions of the possibility to represent numbers. (S1) allows us to understand that, on the one hand, scientific concepts cannot be reduced to linguistic concepts, and, on the other hand, keep up the idea that for numbers as well there *must* be a cultural development and connection from the concrete to the abstract.

3. *Schema 2: Expression, Presentation, (Pure) Signification*

The conception of a tripartite schema of the symbolic function as such dates back to the aforementioned congress in 1927. Cassirer’s idea is to introduce a “general plan of ideal orientation” (SSP 262 [263]), according to which the direction of each symbolic form can be ascertained. Furthermore, it is striking to see in which context the idea of three *dimensions* of symbolic forming is introduced, as it just follows Cassirer’s famous example of a meandering line and a critique of Husserl’s Aristotelian distinction between ὕλη / *hylē* and μορφή / *morphē*. The entire

complex plays a crucial role for the doctrine of symbolic pregnancy and has been taken up again by Cassirer in 1938 to defend his theory against the critique of Konrad Marc-Wogau (*LS* 112-139). All in all, it seems rather unlikely that (S2) is a negligible ad-hoc construction. It is, at that congress, introduced with a mathematical analogy as follows: “Just as we can *completely* [my emphasis] render the figure of a spatial curve by introducing three vertical axes one after another, measuring the distance of every point of the curve from these axes, so it is permissible to distinguish three different *dimensions* of symbolic forming” (*SSP* 259-260 [261]). As I read Cassirer here, the function of symbolism has, in transcendental respect, *exactly* three routes to give symbolic formation its direction. The distinction in three basic symbolic functions furthermore sheds light on Cassirer’s original idea of “a kind of *grammar* of the symbolic function as such” (*PSF* I, 17 [16], my emphasis) that is paralleled with a new form of idealism. The essence of this idealism is to mutually integrate mind and world based on a pragmatic and functional theory of representation and signification. Such an idealism, hence, is supposed to overcome the metaphysical dualism between the meaningful and the sensuous (cf. *ibid.*). The tripartite schema of (S2) actually touches all the core ideas of the *PSF* as such. In the following, I will briefly sketch the three symbolic functions.

(1) The primary symbolic relations are given as original phenomena of expression. Human perception at its core is expressive perception. That is to say, perceiving the world, for Cassirer, means to objectively see the world through a certain “grammar” of signs. A conscious perception of a certain worldly state means to perceive something as being in some way or another meaningful. Mind and world, hence, are related to each other in a manner of representation, but not in the sense of the old representationalist idea of a copy or a mirroring of the world. Subjectivity and objectivity, on the contrary, are correlated, and this correlation can be analyzed as one between symbolic function and symbolic form. Outside of this correlation there is nothing like a subjective mind and an objective world, which is also the

reason why (for humans) there is nothing beyond the symbolic. All basic symbolic experience can be described as expressive, and this means that the “most original and primitive type of this relation confronts us wherever some sensory lived-experience becomes imbued for us with a certain meaning-content to which a characteristic expressive value adheres and appears saturated by it” (*SSP* 260 [261]). Such expressive values are by no means purely subjective. Of course, the human mind plays a crucial role when experiencing the world, because it is only sensible in such and such ways. But expressive values could also not be perceived if they would not be utterances of the world. The warmth of a bold red-yellow-impression or the unsteadiness when beholding the sea surf are direct and meaningful perceptual experiences that presuppose the symbolic relation of expression. The symbolic function of expression is essentially bound to the αἴσθησις / *aísthēsis* and therefore is responsible for facilitating the most basic acts of any cognitive penetration of the world. “This transparency of the sensory is as such inherent in every aesthetic intuition as such; however, it is by no means restricted to the domain of the aesthetic. Rather, it can be recognized in every sound of language and in every elementary figure of myth” (*SSP* 260 [261], my emphasis). Myth, nonetheless, is the symbolic form that corresponds most genuinely to the expressive function, because, as an ideal form, its most essential feature is its absolute indifference toward the difference between reality and appearance, between sign and meaning – which by no means implies a lack of objectivity.

(2) Language, by contrary, is the ideal form of the presentation function, and we have already seen in the last section how, starting with expressive movements, language evolves towards its full functionality through three phases. A basic feature of language is the progressing separation of sign and meaning, which, at its end, enables humans to represent true or false propositions. The sentence “in 2017, Tokyo has more than nine million inhabitants” creates a symbolic relation between a geographically defined place and a number of people (supposedly) living there. Unlike the perception of the expressive characters

above, or the perception of either sign language or onomatopoeic words, the meaning of this sentence is not “directly” comprehensible, much less perceptible. To infer its truth or falsity, it presupposes various types of knowledge, such as having a notion of what “nine million inhabitants” means and how to access information about Tokyo. We have seen above that Cassirer still stresses the activity of the expressive function in language. Admittedly, especially literature and poetry, but also everyday communication is permeated by expressive connotations. It would not be too much of a claim if we were to say that most of our linguistic practices would simply not function without intonation, metaphors, context sensitivity, and empathy. But what is of most importance now is to see that language renders thought into a medium that *principally* can go without all this. The presentation function is *dominant* in language and its novel capacity is to represent facts, or to transform becoming into being as Nietzsche would have it (cf. Nietzsche, *Nachlaß* 1885-1887, KSA 12, 249, 382 and Nietzsche, *Nachlaß* 1887-1889, KSA 13, 36). Cassirer makes this point very clear by referring to the predicative form of language: “The copula ‘is’ is the purest and most pregnant imprint of this new dimension of language, which can be signified with the term that Bühler introduced with reference to Husserl as the function of presentation [*Darstellungsfunktion*]” (SSP 261 [262])¹⁵.

(3) I already addressed the limits of linguistic expression in section II.2. As Cassirer puts it, the “universality [*Allgemeinheit*] of linguistic ‘concepts’ does not stand on the same plane as the universality [*Allgemeinheit*] of scientific, and particularly of natural-scientific, ‘laws’” (PSF III, 62 [64]). As distinguished from signification through the presentation function, Cassirer qualifies the third dimension of symbolic functionality, the significative function, as representing in the form of pure meaning or signification. As an illustrative example, Cassirer recom-

¹⁵ To my view, any analysis of the functionality of the expressive and the presentative function shows that “presentation/presentative” rests a problematic translation of “*Darstellung/darstellend*”, because it essentially mixes up those systematic aspects of meaning that (a) are directly present, and (b) are present by representation.

mends to think of the “modern foundations of geometry introduced by Pasch and brought to completion by Hilbert” (SSP 261 [262]). Points, straight lines, and planes, here, are in a certain sense completely detached from intuition (though not from all presentative meaning), because their meaning is established in relation to the axioms of geometry and not to intuitive formations. “The sign, in the sense of the sign of pure signification, neither expresses nor presents. It is a sign in the sense of a mere abstract correlation” (*ibid.*). The content that is represented by signs and symbols of sciences that are based on modern mathematics is in principle completely detached from signification by forms of perception and intuition. It is “suspended, so to speak, in the free ether of pure thought” (*ibid.*). Curved space-time, for example, can be demonstrated to a perceiving observer, but the conditions of possibility of the underlying theory are not demonstrable simply in the functions of perception and intuition; they are not their *direct* presuppositions. A model that incorporates transcendental and genealogical reflections, like (S2), can nonetheless show such a connection between the perception of expressive characters and the conception of general relativity. Cassirer nicely sums this up as follows:

For the epistemo-critical consideration, an unbroken path leads from the sphere of sense sensation to that of intuition, from intuition to conceptual thinking, and from there further to logical judgment. Yet in following this path, the critique of cognition is aware that as sharply as the individual phases of this path must be distinguished from one another in reflection, they must never be regarded as the independent givennesses [*Gegebenheiten*] of consciousness existing separately from one another. Rather, not only does each complex element here include the simpler ones, not only does each “later” element include the “earlier” one, but conversely the latter is prepared and laid out in the former. All of the components that constitute the concept of cognition are related to each other and to the common goal of cognition, to the “object”: a rigorous analysis can, therefore, discover in each one of them a pointing to all the others. The function of simple sensation and perception is not merely “combined” with the basic intellectual functions of comprehension, judgment, and inference but *is* already such a basic function – it implicitly contains what emerges

there in conscious forming [*Formung*] and in independent configuration (*PSF* I, 280 [277-278]).

The idea that the basic *function* of perception already contains what is only fully developed in cognition is a major thought of Cassirer's phenomenology¹⁶ and a key to understanding his methodology. This makes it an important objection against the possibility of dropping the two schemata.

4. *The Interwovenness of the two Schemata*

To successfully refute the two theses that (a) (S1) and (S2) *coincide*, and that (b) the idea of an interwovenness of (S1) and (S2) is *inconsistent*, it is mandatory to show how myth, language, and science in each case are passing through a mimetic, an analogical, and finally a purely symbolic phase. A first hint that this actually is the case was already given by the fact that Cassirer is referring to *phases or stages* when speaking about (S1) and to *dimensions* when speaking about (S2). Taking this even further, Cassirer explicitly states that "it is characteristic for each form that, in the various phases of its development and in the different stages of its spiritual construction, it has a different relationship to the three basic poles that we have tried to distinguish here" (*SSP* 262 [263]). Unambiguously, Cassirer here implies an interpenetration of (S1) and (S2). In the following I will give textual proof of how Cassirer outlines this matrix of the symbolic in a most precise manner.

(1) Cassirer assigns myth as symbolic form to the expressive function. Bringing to mind the analyses of the phenomenology of myth against the backdrop so far developed, one is immediately confronted with a major question: how at all, even under ideal-typical circumstances, can we separate myth and language in order to apply (S1) to myth? The basic opposition of the holy and the profane, the categories space, time and number, as well as the practices of rite, cult, and sacrifice all presuppose the use

¹⁶ Cassirer fully develops this idea in *Ziele und Wege der Wirklichkeitserkenntnis* (1936-1937), cf. *ECN* 2.

of linguistic signs and even writing. The worldview, Cassirer also speaks of “form worlds” (PSF III, 519 [521]), constituted by myth yet is essentially mimetic: Words like *Mana*, *Tabu*, *Manitu*, *Waka* and so on are *images* that belong to a magical world of imagination that knows of no such divisions as of being and appearing, wakefulness and dreaming or any form of dissociation between sign and meaning. “They still have no independent function of signification and presentation; they are rather like simple sounds of the arousal of mythical emotion [*Affekt*]” (PSF II, 93 [98]). The same applies to written signs that likewise commence as *images*, because in myth the sign “does not merely represent [*vertreten*] it [the thing]; rather, it is effectively equal to it, so that it supplants its immediate presence [*Gegenwart*]” (PSF II, 47 [48-49]). And even mythical conduct is in no way analogical, but mimetic: “The dancer who appears in the mask of the god or daemon does not merely imitate the god or daemon but assumes its nature: the dancer is transformed into the god or daemon and fuses with him” (PSF II, 279 [289]). Myth, hence, remains a rather long time in its mimetic phase.

The analogical phase of myth starts off with the emergence of religions. Cult and rite change myth by bringing to the fore a difference between image and meaning. This is because worshipping a god indicates a deficiency that exists between a higher power and human existence. Finally, this process makes humans understand that signifying an object is not being that object. Thus, it is religion that prepares the split between myth and logos that later on becomes so characteristic for theoretical cognition. “Religion takes the decisive step that is essentially alien to myth: in its use of sensible images and signs it at the same time *knows* them as such – as the means of expression that, though they reveal a determinate sense, must necessarily at the same time remain inadequate to it, which “point to” this sense without ever fully grasping and exhausting it” (PSF II, 280 [290]).

Now, what is the symbolic phase of myth? This question has to be answered in order to avoid skepticism about a possible entanglement of (S1) and (S2). The symbolic phase of

myth also takes place in religion, because religion's relentless progression forces a critique of the mythical world of images. "In the course of its development, every religion is brought to a point at which it must pass through this 'crisis' and in which it must break loose from its mythical ground [*Grund*] and soil [*Boden*]" (*ibid.*). It is especially the monotheistic religions that illustrate the final symbolic stage of myth: here, the human spirit all too clearly is conscious about lacking the means to adequately execute myth's critique, because it would have to turn against itself. And still, this process takes place; the symbolic stage of myth marks a true crisis. Because all contents of the mythical worldview are so closely connected to their material side, everything worldly is significantly devalued through religion's critique on myth. "As a consequence, the ideality of the religious does not merely degrade the totality [*Ganz*] of mythical configurations and forces to a lower order of being but also directs this form of negation toward the elements [*Elemente*] of sensible-natural existence itself" (*ibid.*). Similar to language, that eventually points beyond itself, but cannot realize scientific universality with its own means, in religion myth "comes to itself" and generates the knowledge of its own deficiency. Hence, a crisis is born that calls for new forms of objectification.

(2) For language, the path from the mimetic via the analogical through to the pure symbolic has already been demonstrated (see part II.2, 128-133). The progressive development of written and phonetic language pushes forward the full functionality of the presentative function. Cassirer had shown how this happens by analyzing the transition from expression to presentation as a mutual molding of sign language and spoken language. We had seen that spoken language has to start with the mimetic principle again, although it originally came forth to exist with sign language transcending the mimetic principle. From this, we can derive that not just (S1) and (S2) are interwoven, but (S1) as well *with itself*. That means that not only the logic of (S1) has to be applied to the three symbolic functions, but also to itself. Spoken language e.g., as an instance of the analogical phase, again starts with the mimetic principle to

further advance to the symbolic on the level of (S1) in order to prepare pure symbolic meaning on the level of (S2). More than that, as pure forms, like Cassirer presents myth, language, and cognition in the *PSF*, symbolic forms only exist in analytic abstraction. In reality, all those forms are permeated with and interpenetrate each other. “As far as language may progress in the direction of ‘presentation’ and pure logical ‘signification’ it can never tear away from its interconnection with the primary expressive lived-experience. Determinate ‘expressive characteristics’ remain interwoven with its supreme intellectual achievements” (*PSF* III, 122 [128]).

(3) The two arguments from the inconsistency thesis were (a) that mythical consciousness cannot reach the symbolic stage, and (b) that there is no mimetic and maybe not even an analogical phase of science. The former argument already had been rejected: to reach the purely symbolic by no means equals the achievement of scientific concepts, not even to accomplish the full rupture between myth and logos. To reach the symbolic stage within (S1) basically meant that human consciousness has been plunged into a crisis that it cannot master with the available means of expression. Argument (b) shall be refuted in the following. To start with the obvious: the symbolic phase of science is not its original principle, but starts off where science has become aware of its own groundwork. For Cassirer, this (ideal) event takes place with the shift from substance to function that traces back to Kant. This already gives us a hint as to what the analogical phase of science might be. Still, it is nonetheless legitimate to doubt the possibility of a mimetic phase, because the development of scientific concepts not only presupposes language, but also the true rupture between myth and logos. Myth and science essentially stand opposed to each other: they contradict each other on a theoretical, and more importantly, on a practical level (cf. Kreis 2010, 330). Despite everything, Cassirer is very clear on the subject: it applies as well for the form-world (*Formwelt*) of pure signification that it “as such ‘is there’ [*da ist*] not with one blow. Instead, it is *constituted* only in a gradation of approaches – it passes through a series of dif-

ferent *phases of sense* before it achieves its true and adequate determination” (PSF III, 369 [376]). Furthermore, it poses no problem at all for Cassirer to integrate the thought of contradiction (between myth and science) into the heuristic matrix of (S1) and (S2): “The later phase does not signify over against the former something absolutely estranged; rather, it is only the fulfillment of what was intimated and laid out in the former phase. On the other hand, this intertwining of individual phases does not exclude a sharp and clear opposition between them. For each new phase raises a distinctive and pregnant requirement and sets up a new norm and new ‘idea’ of the spiritual itself” (PSF III, 519 [521-522]).

But can Cassirer tell us something more concrete of a mimetic phase of science? To fully prove the applicability of (S1) to the function of pure signification, he points to the possibility to transfer the genealogy of linguistic concepts to the development of scientific concepts. Whilst taking into account that this can “be done only with a certain methodological reservation” (PSF III, 525 [527]), the development of the scientific concept kicks off with “a kind of ‘mimetic’ phase, which is followed by a transition through an ‘analogical’ phase, until at length the truly symbolic form of concept formation is achieved” (*ibid.*). Hence, the mimetic phase of scientific concept formation can be located in Aristotle’s *Physics*, in which “sensible experiences, which are taken up from direct observation, logical determinations, and teleological principles and norms, still form a relatively undifferentiated unity” (PSF III, 526-527 [528]). Then, according to Cassirer, the analogical phase of scientific concept formation emerges with modern philosophy, especially with the works of Descartes (cf. PSF III, 527). The incipient mathematization of cognition, and the construction of nature as a mechanism lead to an analogization of knowledge and intuition. Perception no longer plays a role for the object of knowledge. The latter is schematized through intuition, and hence conceived mathematically. A first step into the realm of pure relations is then undertaken in Leibniz’s critique on Descartes’ physics (cf. PSF III, 529-530). But the final step in establishing the function of pure

signification is gained not before the dawn of Einstein's theory of relativity, and quantum mechanics. "For the most important fundamental step had now been taken: the transition from the physics of matter to pure 'field physics'. The reality [*Realität*] that we designate as a 'field' is no longer thought of as a complex of physical *things*; rather, it is the expression for an ensemble of physical *relations* [*Relationen*]" (*PSF* III, 540 [540]). We can thus conclude that, from a methodological point of view, (S1) is fully applicable to (S2).

5. Consequences for an Open System of Symbolic Forms

I initially stated, and already quoted Cassirer in this respect in part II, section 3, that the matrix of symbolic functions and stages comes along with a completeness-thesis. This presses the question how this idea could possibly coexist with Cassirer's claim of an open system of symbolic forms (cf. Kreis 2010, 288-392). As we could see, Cassirer's heuristic of symbolic functionality and its development assume superposition and mutual interpenetration of three symbolic functions along with a development through three stages. The dominance of exactly one symbolic function was characteristic for each of the symbolic forms that were presented in the *PSF*. This may lead us to wonder if multiple symbolic functions could be equally dominant in one symbolic form that is not myth, language, or cognition. Cassirer specifically addresses this question at the already mentioned congress for aesthetics in 1927 where he presents art as a symbolic form. Here he states that art, on the one hand, essentially is presentative [*darstellend*], but, on the other hand, stays attached to perception and intuition. For example, we can say that the aesthetics of Kasimir Malewitsch's suprematism feeds on perception of color and elements of intuition (like geometric forms). Even his *Black Square* (1915) does not transcend the perceptual, though it seeks to symbolize pure intentionality by abstractness. "No matter how far or how high aesthetic presentation reaches beyond the sensory givenness of appearances, or how much it strives toward the ideal [...] it is and remains re-

stricted to intuitional being and must closely cling to it” (*SSP* 267 [268]). This still applies to a piece of art like *Silence Score* (1997) from Pierre Huyghe that wants to present an empty exhibition space with reference to John Cage’s *4’33* (1952), realizing that its presentation is only possible by pinning Cage’s actual score on a white wall of an empty room. With that said, we now have gained the transition from artistic practice to aesthetic theory, for which it seems more difficult “to understand the relations maintained within aesthetic apprehension and configuration, between the world of pure expression and the world of pure presentation” (*ibid.*). According to Cassirer, aesthetic theory continuously alternates between those two poles, always trying to entrench aesthetic experience in only either expression or presentation:

The attempt has been made, not infrequently, to relate the aesthetic exclusively or, at least, chiefly to one of these two poles, thereby giving it a foundation. There are aesthetic systems that try so much to restrict art to the emotional and have it so fully absorbed by the pure lived-experiences of expression that, as a result, that which is characteristic of the aesthetic object is almost lost. There are others, however, that try to separate the aesthetic in the strict and proper sense from its roots in subjective “feeling” so that, for them, it becomes nothing but a definite, basic form of objective comprehension and knowledge, which, as such, stands on the same level as the theoretical knowledge of nature (*ibid.*)

The disjunction between the expressive and the presentative function for the question of aesthetics leads away from truly understanding aesthetics as form and rather enforces its own destruction. Against this, Cassirer defines the form motive of art as “the merging [*Aufgehen*] of the one into the other” (*SSP* 268 [269]), since it is “the ideal balance that presents itself between them, that constitutes aesthetic comportment as well as the aesthetic object” (*ibid.*). It is anyone’s guess if it follows from this that art is especially successful where a fine balance between expressive and presentative motives has been reached. At least, Cassirer suggests three years later in *Form and Tech-*

nology (1930) that, seen from the competition between the expressive and significative functions within the symbolic form of technology, art in itself is an ideal balance between those two (cf. *FT* 178 [313]). What follows for the theory of symbolic representation as such is that symbolic forms in general (that are not myth, language, or cognition) in no sense presuppose the dominance of only *one* symbolic function. And from here we can finally address the question why Cassirer of all forms choses myth, language, and cognition in *PSF*: those forms are attributed a certain dignity, because it is exactly these three forms that encompass a clear dominance of exactly one underlying symbolic function, whereas all other symbolic forms are built upon a struggle for dominance of at least two of the three symbolic functions. This proof that myth, language, and cognition are extremes in the sense that only one symbolic function dominates their development demonstrates in one blow the completeness-thesis in a methodological respect. However, the critical reader should bear in mind that to say that the analysis of the symbolic functions is complete does not mean that the system of forms is complete resp. closed. The completeness-thesis simply bears no consequences for an open system of symbolic forms, because it does not contradict such openness.

Conclusion

It was shown that (S1) is constituted by a *methodic teleology*: the symbolic phases: "mimetic-analogical-symbolic" form a vector originating from the sensuous and pointing towards the abstract. It was important to see that this idea entails no metaphysical claims, but is conceived purely methodological in order to reconcile the transcendental approach with a genealogical perspective on the development and interplay of the three basic symbolic functions of expression, presentation, and pure signification (S2). With Cassirer, I argued that this progress neither proceeds straightforwardly, nor is it safe from backlashes, and it is not equally distinct at all times and for all symbolic forms. Not only does Cassirer speak of repetitious crises within

the advancement of symbolic expression. In addition, he marks this process as a continuous shift of “accents of significance” (PSF III, 519 [522]), stating clearly that the basic methodological aim of the *PSF* is to “characterize the tendency of this shift of accent in the process of symbolic configuration in a short *formula* in which we distinguish three stages and as it were three dimensions” (*ibid.*)¹⁷.

To conclude, I want to get back to an initial question about the dialectics of the *PSF*. Coherence and consistency of (S1) and (S2) not only have shown an abstract dialectics of ideal forms. There is a *material* side to this dialectical process in concrete myths, languages, and scientific theories. The latter especially enabled Cassirer to demonstrate how “a distinctive dialectical process in physics reached its conclusion” (PSF III, 542 [541]). The matrix of symbolic stages and dimensions “stands in need of confirmation and concrete fulfillment” (PSF III, 525 [527]), and this dialectical side of science *itself* actually can be confirmed “by considering [...] its reflection in philosophical systems” (*ibid.*). If we understand the following in a transcendental way, we can eventually conclude that the method of culture is the genealogy of culture – in all its forms.

¹⁷ The original text unequivocally states the productive conjunction of (S1) and (S2) into a “formula”: “Wir können die Richtung dieser Akzentverschiebung im Prozeß der symbolischen Gestaltung in einer kurzen Formel bezeichnen, indem wir innerhalb derselben drei Stadien und gleichsam drei Dimensionen unterscheiden” (PSF III, 519).

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