



**XAVIER VERLEY, *Sur le symbolisme. Cassirer, Whitehead et Ruyer.* [On Symbolism: Cassirer, Whitehead, and Ruyer.] Louvain-la-Neuve: Éditions Chromatika, 2013: 210 pages. [Reviewed by PHILIPPE GAGNON, College of Adult & Professional Studies, Bethel University, Saint Paul, MN 55112. Email: <pmg82224@bethel.edu>.]**

*On Symbolism* is one of the two books that Xavier Verley published in this the last year of his life, the other being *Whitehead: Un métaphysicien de l'expérience* [*Whitehead: A Metaphysician of Experience*]. The book offers a defense of the “cosmological” viewpoint, which he has been for many years opposing to idealism. Verley criticizes knowledge claims that have their origin in a subject’s capacities for reflection and synthesis, and which are deemed to be obtained through a separation from nature. The first chapter discusses the philosophical implications of Ernst Cassirer’s 1923 essay, “The Concept of Symbolic Form in the Construction of Human Sciences.” It is followed by a chapter that develops themes contained in Whitehead’s *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect* (1927). Next comes a chapter presenting various themes from Raymond Ruyer’s *L’animal, l’homme, la fonction symbolique* (1964) [*Animal, Man, and The Function of the Symbolic*]—a book that is placed into relation with Cassirer’s notion of symbolic forms, and which articulates a conception of the human being as a creature who exists in a universe of meaning according to her valuative capacities. In the following section, entitled “Summary and Perspectives,” Verley expands on the notions of expression, isomorphism, and projection along similar lines as Whitehead has done. Whitehead called into service the open concepts of projective geometry, which he thought were better suited than traditional ones in appreciating the relationship between the whole and its parts in a processive universe containing a multiplicity of centers. The final chapter of the book attempts to situate what is properly human in relation to the human sciences and to the challenges facing them. The conclusion re-expresses the leitmotiv of the whole book: that only the concept of “being-together,” a notion that re-inserts

the human into a hospitable and friendly cosmos, can offer a cosmology wherein norms, laws, rights, actions, and values do not come out in the end as arbitrary impositions.

In the initial chapter on Cassirer, Verley distances himself progressively from the notion that the mind is a mirror of reality, which simply copies that which surrounds it. Rather experience involves valuation and a search for meaning. The access to meaning, which enables symbolic expression, highlights the transition from a conception of the mind understood as a capacity to witness an exterior spectacle to a conception in which the understanding imparts form and relies on the cogitative activity of the subject. It is not just the theory of knowledge, but the special sciences as well, that have followed this trajectory, going from presumed objectivity—the reading of the “great book” of nature—to subjectivity and the crisis in the foundations of empirical sciences that were witnessed by Cassirer.

In the chapter on Whitehead, Verley builds on the notion of symbolism employing the initial resources that are provided by the notion of “event,” situating the knower in space-time and opening a perspective for the perception of other events. He underscores what is left out by perspectives that start with a self-affecting consciousness that presupposes itself to all of its cognitive acts. He attempts to supplement this view with the notion of the mind as in community with all natural beings, by which the mind is made capable of perceiving. Ultimately, idealism restricts the knowledge that is given to the senses and separates knowers from a reality that is declared unknowable. However, the cosmological perspective, by referring to space-time, overturns the Copernican revolution in the theory of knowledge, firstly since what matters is neither knowledge nor intelligibility but the pursuit of meaning, and secondly because we rediscover a universe about which we can know something. The symbolic dimension shows us a subject that produces itself in the experience of referring. In turn, this is only possible if the symbol is not detached from its relationship to significance (*signification*). Thus we can appreciate why Verley is adamant to base his metaphysical constructions on a notion of identity, relying on an equivalence class, instead of putting to work the notion of unity (164).

Ruyer proposes a theory of true forms, which he does not oppose to a reality known otherwise, but rather connects them together by means of a functional relation that is structured around isomorphism. Phenomena are directed by a finality which does not lead to some unknown otherland, but rather finds their de-localized foundation in a theory of memory,

firstly of an organic kind, and secondly, of a supra-individual kind and yet never detached from the structure of space-time. Verley affirms the connection that exists for both Ruyer and Whitehead between cosmology and biology, which thereafter makes room for a notion of consciousness, by postulating an internal relation between life and the universe, which departs from the assumption of a transcendent anthropomorphic Creator. The hypothesis that an organic memory exists on which psychological (*psychique*) memory can rely opens up the possibility of a genuine apprehension of the reality of forms, which become potentials awaiting a consciousness and/or a subject in order to actualize themselves. Verley then introduces the idea of homunculus which serves to preserve a kernel of truth found in the older myths, when we see how it is possible for a representation of the whole organism to be contained in a part of the cerebral cortex. There is a doubling-up of the organs that effect action, and, as such, the notion of the soul has reality, yet without any need to make it more than a psycho-physiological co-mixture. Ruyer re-introduces, on a cosmological basis, the orientation of consciousness to action as well as the reflectivity that is tied to research, attributing them both to all living beings. For Verley, what we have then is no less than a transformation of the idea of totality, be it in the sense of a whole superior to the sum of its parts or in the sense of one that is detached from them. The dual logical operation reflects the totality in its parts, and the parts can be in their turn considered as wholes. With evolution, we see that the brain detaches itself from the organism in order to direct it, and we witness the establishment of a part-whole relationship such that it is possible for the part to command to the whole. Verley suggests that we see all human activities and their destination under a new light, no longer thinking of them as *vinculum substantiale*, but rather as *vinculum functionale*. This serves as a point of contact with the legacy of Cassirer, who, towards the end of his life, recognized that function has precedence over form, since from that vantage point one can understand the expression of forms from a common origin—that of the capacity for symbolization. Human beings come on the scene when a stimulus as signal is not understood anymore as indicating the presence or the absence of an object; rather, sign and symbol are understood as enabling the conception of the object even in its absence.

The section on “Summary and Perspectives” assesses the problem of the duplication of forms in reality, between perceptive forms manifested in space-time, and real forms that serve to organize it. One grasps the concept of expression when one sees that there is not only duplication

between immediate and reflective consciousness, but that this capacity has a cosmological range, everywhere present in animal and vegetal life. What comes next is an effort to establish the idea of expression, both logically and cosmologically. Following in the footsteps of Jean Largeault, Verley wants to overcome epistemology and its problems, seeing that it contains a hidden idealism. This is mediated through a renewed understanding of negation, from which it will come out weakened, becoming opposition rather than contradiction, by way of overlappings and nestings that do not suppress the other term. One will not find, for reasons alluded to earlier, any concept of synthesis or of overcoming in the Hegelian sense. Negation as a function of inversion turns existence away from a problematic mystery since, following Frege, it is now tied to the idea of a place-holder, of a value differing from zero as the satisfaction of a function. Verley wants to rethink the problem by drawing inspiration from the Cantor set, which makes it possible to think of the world as a totality that does not disempower any of its parts.

In Verley's overall standpoint, the dialectics that live at the heart of phenomenology are declared inimical to the cosmological perspective. Verley provides a very good summary and commentary on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in the process of probing into its peculiar theory of isomorphism. The world, the totality of states of affairs, includes virtual states of affairs since objects can, by their logical form, insert themselves into states of affairs. Just like in Ruyer, who was cognizant of this fact, form and structure are put into relation with one another, allowing for there to be a recognition of forms dependent on structures. Verley underscores just how much it is a misinterpretation (see §2ff. of the *Tractatus*) to translate into French the German "*bild*" with reference to the word "image," which thus orients the thought of Wittgenstein toward a transcendental philosophy. He suggests that we rehabilitate the French translation of P. Klossowski by employing the word "*tableau*." The "*tableau*," which Ruyer even translates as "painting," is a fact that allows for there to be a knowledge of other facts. It cannot express its form, but simply shows it.

Verley tries to retrieve a convergence between Whitehead and Ruyer, putting at the forefront a symbolic isomorphism that differs from mimetic isomorphism; the symbolic animal does not as much try to replicate the world as it tries to synchronize with its trajectory. Meaning directs action toward a causality that acts in space-time while being controlled by a

transverse or perpendicular space that contains meaning, themata, and values. For Whitehead, projection and perception occur simultaneously, as we project into the past and the future, but also as the whole universe projects itself in us. Verley provides a standpoint which could make us experience knowledge (Fr. *connaissance*) as involving re-cognition (Fr. *re-connaissance*, see 197), thus defining a task for the metaphysics of “being-together” which is not that of unearthing the essence of the human, but that of transposing the knowledge we get from the human sciences into a general science that is able to retrieve the global form by relying on the scattered partial forms. Such a view is not an overcoming nor is it a dialectics, but rather a transposition in a global dimension.

In the conclusion to the book, Verley calls us to turn away from dialectics and from privileging the synthetic activity of the knowing subject. It boggles the mind to read that those confused and even dangerous notions are to be replaced by the much clearer ones of reunion, intersection, and inclusion. In the “Summary and Perspectives” section, Verley has tried to derive a metaphysics from the logical relation of duality, which amounts to getting it from the De Morgan Laws! René Thom argued long ago that nothing is really clear in these supposedly primitive notions of set theory (see “‘Modern’ Mathematics: An Educational and Philosophic Error?,” *American Scientist*, 59.6, 1971: 698-699). What is more, Jacques Maritain well appreciated how mathematical logic has a “potluck” character—that it has all the more chance of containing every piece of intelligibility that it applies to nothing. By its refusal of existential import, it has been constructed so as not to speak of transcendence such that there is circularity in congratulating oneself that it eliminates it (see “No Knowledge Without Intuitivity” reprinted in *Untrammelled Approaches*, trans. B. E. Doering. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987: 339). One will also notice the affirmation, alongside other notions deemed “dangerous,” of a dualistic metaphysics that would breed war and repression. These kinds of affirmation will be found sobering and some will judge them as simplistic. Yet, if one were to draw a parallel with the reflection of Michel Serres in *The Birth of Physics* (Trans. J. Hawkes, Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000: 109-118), wherein a fascinating connection with information theory is made around the indefinite repetition of the same, which is said to establish Martial law and the cult of Mars, one might come to see in the proposal of Verley a repercussion of this insight. Specifically, he aims to alert us as to when the principle of identity

becomes a principle of exclusion and does not allow for information to enter laterally into a system or into the head of a subject.

What will a metaphysics of “being-together,” involving the passage from disjunctions to conjunction, entail ultimately? Does it represent a call to submit to the universal? In attempting to trace where, logically, such a metaphysics may lead us, one falls into paradoxes and antinomies. We want to assert the freedom of all beings, of all existing entities, and to challenge the Martial law that is coming to us from above, but if determinism is universal, then we will have to negate that which we posit, namely freedom. To say, in company of Descartes, *causa seu ratio* and to refuse to phenomenological consciousness the freedom of indifference is all well and good, but the same Descartes, here reviled for having moved to the camp of the metaphysicians, had to immerse himself in God and in the mysteries of providence in order to continue to hold the substantial union of mind and body to which he believed. Here it is the total organism of becoming which, on the trail of Spinoza, one wants to turn into substance.