

THOMAS MORMANN

A VIRTUAL DEBATE IN EXILE: CASSIRER AND THE VIENNA CIRCLE AFTER 1933

Ernst Cassirer, 2011, *Symbolische Prägnanz, Ausdrucksphänomen und „Wiener Kreis“*, *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, vol. 4, ed. Christian Möckel, 478pp., Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag.¹

1. CASSIRER AND OTHER PHILOSOPHERS

Cassirer was one of the leading philosophers and public intellectuals in Germany in the last years of the Weimar Republic. In philosophy of science one might recall his discussion with Schlick on the philosophical interpretation of Einstein's relativity theory in the early 1920s. The famous *Davos Disputation* of Cassirer and Heidegger in 1929 was considered a major philosophical event by his contemporaries. The participants included Carnap who on this occasion got to know Cassirer personally. Later, Cassirer, Schlick, and Carnap met several times in Vienna. Carnap had received essential ideas for the *Aufbau* from Cassirer and other neo-Kantians, and he referred to Cassirer's works already in his first philosophical publication *Der Raum* (Carnap 1922). Cassirer's contacts were not restricted to the members of the Vienna Circle – he was on friendly terms from 1915 till the end of his life with his former student Reichenbach.² Not all members of the Vienna Circle held Cassirer in high esteem, however. Neurath dismissively characterized him as a “Kantian, who sometimes stood more closely to the basic conception of modern science than other Kantians ...” (Neurath, 1936, 694). In a similar vein, Philipp Frank used to characterize Cassirer as a representative of “school philosophy”. Only later, in a review of Cassirer's *Determinismus und Indeterminismus in der modernen Physik* (Cassirer 1937), did he reluctantly extend a poisoned accolade to Cassirer by describing the book “as a highly successful attempt to continue the adjustment of the traditional idealist philosophy to the progress of science”,

1 In this paper, the following abbreviations for Cassirer's works are used: ECW = Ernst Cassirer Werke, ECN = Ernst Cassirer Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte, ECB = Ernst Cassirer Briefe, SF = Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff, PSF = Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen. All Cassirer citations are translated from the German into English by the reviewer.

2 The last but one letter that Cassirer wrote before his unexpected death on April 13 of 1945 was to Reichenbach, who had invited him as a visiting scholar to California (ECB, pp. 238-239, April 10, 1945).

which, in his opinion, could end “only with the complete disintegration of the traditional philosophy” (Frank 1938 (1955), 184/185). *Pace* Frank’s contribution. The award for the most curious dispute with Cassirer should probably go to Kurt Grelling who thirty years earlier, in the youthful polemical paper *Das gute, klare Recht der Freunde der anthropologischen Vernunftkritik, verteidigt gegen Ernst Cassirer* (Grelling 1908), had taken issue with Cassirer defending Leonard Nelson in the latter’s dispute with Hermann Cohen, Cassirer’s mentor and the head of Marburg neo-Kantianism.³

In sum, in the 1920s Cassirer and the members of the Vienna Circle and the Berlin group were involved in quite a few, sometimes polemical discussions with each other that dealt with a broad spectrum of themes from science and philosophy. After the Nationalsocialists seized power in Germany and the Clerical Fascists in Austria most members of these groups and many other philosophers and scientists were forced to emigrate. Most went to the US, but some also to other countries, such as Great Britain (Cassirer, Neurath), Sweden (Cassirer), or even Turkey (Reichenbach), at least temporarily. The intellectual connections that had existed since the first decades of the last century were thus interrupted or at least seriously damaged due to the often difficult circumstances under which the emigrants had to live. One might assume that the vivid intellectual exchanges that had taken place during the Weimar years would have considerably diminished. Cassirer and the logical empiricists defy this conjecture – at least in one direction: Cassirer’s interest in the philosophy of the Vienna Circle reached its peak *after* the Circle had ceased to exist in Vienna (cf. Krois 2000, 136). This is amply evidenced by Cassirer’s posthumous writings ECN (*Ernst Cassirer Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*) whose publication is now well under way in a lavish critical edition under the general editorship of John Michael Krois (†), Klaus Christian Köhnke, and Oskar Schwemmer. Twenty volumes are projected from which about twelve have been already published. ECN drags its material from the holdings of the *Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library* at Yale University, and of other libraries and privately owned manuscripts.

According to the publisher, the volumes of ECN are arranged thematically. This must be understood in a broad sense: on the one hand, the volume under review (ECN4) brings together many texts that do not have much to do with Cassirer’s relation to the Vienna Circle, on the other hand many other volumes of ECN do contain a wealth of papers that deal extensively with precisely this topic. Thus, a reader who wishes to gain a broad understanding of Cassirer’s later thought on a specific topic is well advised to read across the different volumes of ECN. The present review will follow this strategy, i.e., focus only those texts of ECN4 that are relevant to the topic of this essay, but at the same time consider pertinent texts from other volumes of ECN. Nonetheless, it seems expedient to give

3 Twenty years later, Neurath, Carnap, and Hahn considered Grelling’s paper as important enough to be included in the bibliography of *The Scientific Conception of the World: The Vienna Circle* (Manifesto).

the reader a short description of the topics that are treated in ECN4. The volume has two main parts: (I) *Symbolische Prägnanz, Ausdrucksphänomen und "Wiener Kreis"*, and (II) *Beilagen* that provide among other texts some lecture notes of Cassirer's from the early 1920s. The volume is rounded off with an extensive appendix (*Anhang*) of approximately 160 pages containing critical editorial comments and further elucidations regarding the published material.

While Cassirer's continuing interest in logical empiricism in general and in the Vienna Circle in particular is evidenced by a wealth of texts now available in ECN, the interest of members of the Vienna Circle in Cassirer after 1933 is more difficult to substantiate. Carnap, for instance, hardly ever mentioned Cassirer in his later writings. This should not be interpreted as meaning that he was not interested in Cassirer's later philosophy. As I would like to show in the following, a kind of virtual debate took place: Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms may be considered as an implicit target of Carnap in the early thirties.

More precisely, the aim of this essay is to discuss some aspects of the virtual disputes that Cassirer had in ECN with the leading figures of the Vienna Circle, in particular with Carnap.⁴ This may give us an idea of how a debate between two competing currents of German enlightenment-oriented philosophy could have looked like under more fortunate historical circumstances. This may not be only of historico-philosophical interest: It does not seem unreasonable to contend that such a debate has remained a matter still to be resolved for German philosophy to this today.⁵

The publication of Cassirer's posthumous writings in ECN is, of course, not only important for elucidating his relations with the logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle, it also sheds new light on his philosophy in general. The writings of ECN show that his thought after the completion of his opus magnum *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923 – 1929) (PSF) underwent a further evolution that brought many new aspects to the fore. This is evidenced in particular by the so-called "fourth volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*" (ECN1) in which Cassirer sought to address philosophical currents that had not yet found their place

4 Although Cassirer was well aware of the fact (cf. ECN4, 186) that the Vienna Circle was not a monolithic philosophical movement, after 1933 he mainly dealt with Carnap's version of logical empiricism. To some extent, he later tended to identify the Vienna Circle's logical empiricism with Carnap's. Before 1933, his main addressee had been Schlick, as is exemplified, for instance, by Cassirer (1927). Schlick had started the debate with Cassirer already in 1921 with the highly influential paper *Kritizistische oder empiristische Deutung der neuen Physik? Bemerkungen zu Ernst Cassirers Buch „Zur Einsteinschen Relativitätstheorie“* (Schlick 1921).

5 As is well known, after the end of the Second World War, in Germany and Austria anti-enlightenment and reactionary philosophies continued to dominate the philosophical scene for decades. Many intellectual figures, who had been prominent already in the Weimar Republic, kept on being influential in West Germany. Cassirer was not one of them.

in his philosophical universe. The most prominent ones were perhaps Husserlian phenomenology, *Lebensphilosophie*, and the rising star of Heidegger.

These new ingredients had a considerable influence on his stance toward the logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle. Or, seen from the opposite perspective, Cassirer's numerous references to logical empiricism in the texts of ECN show that he was at pains to defend his own account of philosophy (dubbed "critical idealism" or "philosophy of symbolic forms") against the rivaling one of the logical empiricists that had been put forward most vigorously by Carnap.

While Cassirer was in the process of developing an all-encompassing philosophy of culture, at the same time Carnap's style of philosophizing evolved in a quite different direction. In the *Aufbau* he had still opted for a "comprehensive scientific philosophy" that dealt not only with empirical and formal sciences, but also sought to include a theory of *Geisteswissenschaften* dealing with cultural objects, in particular values (cf. Mormann (2006)). Around 1930, however, he began to favor a "restrictive scientific philosophy" according to which values and other cultural objects ceased to be respectable objects of study for scientific philosophy. In his post-*Aufbau* works Carnap concentrated more and more on formal and logical aspects of philosophy of science, and hardly ever mentioned the work of traditional philosophers as is evidenced in *Logische Syntax der Sprache* (Carnap 1934) and the programmatic article *On the Character of Philosophical Problems* (Carnap 1934a) written for the newly founded journal *Philosophy of Science*. Thus, after 1930 Cassirer and Carnap headed in quite different directions. While Cassirer sought to reach an all-embracing panoramic understanding of the sciences, the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften* or *Kulturwissenschaften*) and other symbolic forms, Carnap concentrated on the logic of science as the very essence of a (post) philosophical understanding of science and human reason.

This does not mean that Carnap ignored traditional philosophy altogether. On the contrary, it remained an important concern for him. *The Elimination of Metaphysics by through Logical Analysis of Language* (Carnap 1932), *The Unity of Science* (Carnap 1932a) and *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (Carnap 1935) may be read as relentless, although anonymous, attacks on then contemporary non-empiricist philosophical currents. While *Overcoming* targeted Heidegger and, on a different level, Rickert's *Wertwissenschaft*, *The Unity of Science* (Carnap 1932a) and *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (Carnap 1935) targeted central theses of Cassirer's philosophy of the symbolic forms, namely, the meaningfulness of the expressive function. In these papers neither Rickert nor Cassirer nor any other "traditional" philosopher is mentioned by name. Not even Heidegger was considered as an individual philosopher but just as a typical metaphysician, as Carnap dismissively asserted in a footnote. This peculiar style was probably due to the fact that these articles were not meant as contributions to an open-ended discussion with philosophical adversaries but as "official announcements" of the doctrines of the logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle.

Thus, one may speak of a virtual debate between Cassirer and Carnap (whom Cassirer seemed to have considered as a sort of representative of the Vienna Circle) that took place after 1933 when most of members of the Vienna Circle and Cassirer had been exiled from their home countries.

Following the Second World War, the fates of Cassirer's and Carnap's philosophies were quite different: Carnap's version of logical empiricism became part of mainstream analytic philosophy in the US, while Cassirer's philosophy rapidly fell into oblivion.⁶ In Germany and the rest of Europe the twelve years of the Third Reich had sufficed to wipe out his memory almost completely.⁷ This dark age for Cassirer scholarship definitively belongs to the past. Since the mid-eighties of the last century a Cassirer-renaissance is well under way. Meanwhile the immense project of a critical edition of his collected works ECW and his posthumous writings ECN has been realized to a large extent. A wealth of secondary literature is constantly being produced, and Cassirer may safely be considered a recognized classical author of 20th century philosophy.

Cassirer's critique of logical empiricism concentrated on the issue of physicalism. Independently of this topic, however, he considered the Viennese way of philosophizing as resulting in a serious impoverishment of philosophy, and he vigorously argued against the allegedly reductionist conception of knowledge, science, and philosophy favored by the Viennese philosophers. For this endeavor, he drew on a variety of arguments from his Philosophy of symbolic forms, phenomenology, and *Lebensphilosophie*.

The outline of this paper is as follows. In section 2 the project of physicalist logical empiricism is contrasted with Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms: Physicalism is characterized by its thorough-going monism. According to it there is only one kind of science to be formulated in one language, to wit, the language of physics. In contrast, the philosophy of symbolic forms insists on an irreducible

6 Evidence for this is the fact that for more than thirty years after Cassirer's death (until the 1980s) no serious efforts were made to make accessible Cassirer's philosophical *Nachlass*.

7 For German-speaking philosophy, this is witnessed by Stegmüller's *Hauptströmungen der Gegenwartsphilosophie* (1952 (1989⁷)). Stegmüller mentioned Cassirer only in a footnote as „one of the most important and knowledgeable Kant scholars.“ On the other hand, he saw no problem ranking Scheler, Hartmann, Jaspers, Haeberlin, and Reininger among the protagonists of the most important contemporary currents of philosophy – still in the latest edition of 1989. For several decades, *Hauptströmungen* was a very popular reference work, but nobody complained, as far as I know, about the author's strange selection of the “main currents of contemporary philosophy”. Stegmüller not only didn't take notice of Cassirer, he also preferred to ignore marxism and pragmatism (cf. Mormann 2010). Even in Schnädelbach's *Philosophy in Germany 1831–1933* (Schnädelbach 1984) Cassirer is mentioned in passing only once as the author of “his classic work of *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*“ (ibid., 87) In contrast, Schnädelbach dedicates detailed discussions to the works of Cassirer's Weimar contemporaries Rickert, Scheler, and Spengler.

plurality of symbolic forms and their languages, all of which philosophy has to recognize without dogmatically singling out the physical one as the only one that has cognitive content.

As Cassirer had argued in PSF an important source for the irreducible plurality of symbolic forms was the so called “expressive function” of symbolization (cf. (PSF III, Part I)). While in PSF the expressive function was primarily discussed in its relation to the symbolic form of myth, in many writings of ECN this concept became also important for the constitution of psychology and *Kulturwissenschaften*. As will be shown in section 3, Cassirer’s account of the expressive function directly clashes with that of Carnap, for whom expressive propositions had no cognitive content at all.

Section 4 deals with Cassirer’s attempt to find a middle way between *Lebensphilosophie* and logical empiricism (cf. also Ikonen 2011). He considered both to be one-sided philosophical currents suffering from complementary shortcomings, namely, a dogmatic acceptance of the contentions of the expressive function from the side of *Lebensphilosophie*, and an equally dogmatic skepticism with respect to the expressive function from the side of logical empiricism. The aim of section 5 is to assess the affinities and the differences between Cassirer and logical empiricism. On the one hand, Cassirer clearly recognized that both accounts shared a philosophical legacy that may be roughly characterized as enlightenment-oriented, scientific philosophy. On the other hand, the two accounts conceived of the task of philosophy in quite different, perhaps even opposite ways: for Carnap philosophy and science were theoretical, while Cassirer saw science and philosophy as activities of a collective subject that aimed to constitute a complex network of symbolic meanings.

2. PHYSICALIST MONISM AND SYMBOLIC PLURALISM

For Cassirer, the core of the Vienna Circle’s logical empiricism was physicalism. According to him, the physicalist doctrine most clearly marked the differences between his “philosophy of symbolic forms” and Viennese empiricism.

In the following I will mainly deal with the manuscript *Symbolische Prägnanz, Ausdrucksphänomen und „Wiener Kreis“* from ECN4. Symbolic pregnancy and expression phenomenon being key concepts of the philosophy of the symbolic forms, already the title of this text indicates what was at stake here for Cassirer, namely, the defense of his philosophical position against the Vienna logical empiricism. (ECN4) was, however, in no way the only text in which Cassirer was struggling with Vienna. Disputes about logico-empiricist theses are to be found in many volumes of (ECN), see for instance, ECN 1 (118 – 120), ECN2 (7, 135ff), ECN4 (153ff, 205, 209f), or ECN5 (72 – 74).⁸

⁸ *Symbolische Prägnanz, Ausdrucksphänomen und „Wiener Kreis“* was written

Cassirer's main references for his discussion of physicalism were the *Aufbau* (Carnap 1928), *Pseudoproblems in Philosophy* (Carnap 1928a), and *The Unity of Science* (Carnap 1932a). In this booklet Carnap formulated physicalism as the thesis about the global architectonics of science. According to it, the traditional separation between the natural sciences, the humanities, and psychology was obsolete. They were all parts of the same unified science. The language of unified science was to be a physical language, i.e., a language of an ideal physics, in which all scientific statements are statements about spatio-temporal events and processes. Moreover, philosophy was not to be conceived of as an extra science having its own domain; rather, the task of philosophy was the clarification of the concepts and propositions of science (cf. Carnap (1932, 433)).

Cassirer vigorously rejected these monopolist claims. According to him, the language of physics was not a universal language, but just a special language. Moreover, philosophy had to take into account *all* languages since they all were cultural products in their own right. Thereby it had to become a pluralist philosophy of symbolic forms (cf. ECN 4, 205). Philosophy was not primarily engaged in determining *a priori* which were admissible and which were not.

As Carnap had already expected, physicalism met the fiercest resistance in the case of psychology (cf. Carnap (1932, 36f)). Complementarily, the partisans of physicalism believed that a physicalist translation of psychology was of strategic significance for their program: If only psychology fell prey to physicalism, the physicalist translations of all other sciences, dealing with historical, cultural, and economic issues, would easily follow (ibid. 72). But, as Carnap pointed out, this would be the case only for the really scientific propositions in this the area – the many pseudo-concepts, which cluttered the *Geisteswissenschaften* or *Kulturwissenschaften*, would, of course, not be translatable into properly scientific, genuine physicalist terms. In other words, for Carnap, translatability into physicalist language served as a criterion for scientificity.

Cassirer agreed with Carnap in that psychology and *Kulturwissenschaften* were crucial for physicalism. Consequently, he concentrated his attacks against physicalism exactly on this point, namely, the physicalist contention that psychology could be reformulated in physicalist, i.e., behaviorist terms. For Cassirer, the basic flaw of all physicalist attempts to explain the psychical was located in the implicit positivist assumption that “originally” only the physical was given. Taking the physical as starting point, the task for physicalism was to explain how from this base the psychical could be constituted in some way or other. According to Cassirer this project was doomed to fail from the outset, since an analysis of the transcendental presuppositions revealed that the physical was not originally given

1935/1936 probably as material for an article that Reichenbach had commissioned for *Erkenntnis*. Cassirer had planned to take Schlick as the target of his contribution (cf. ECN4, 340). After Schlick's assassination Cassirer no longer pursued this project, although, as he wrote to Reichenbach, “the thing is pretty well finished inside of my head” (ECB, September 1, 1936, p. 151).

(cf. ECN4, 153). To back this claim, he relied on arguments from phenomenology according to which the phenomena of the “I” and the “Thou” are basic phenomena not reducible to any other phenomena such as the physical “It” – neither by analogy, empathy, or by any other method.⁹ Rather, for positing an objective physical world, a community of subjects that already share a common world was necessary. Taking the physical as an ultimate basis was a positivist prejudice.

Carnap’s confessed adherence to physicalism did not entail that the *Aufbau* project did not share important features with his “Critical philosophy” and Husserl’s phenomenology (cf. ECN4, 153), namely, that the concept of constitution played a central role in all three of them. Indeed, in constituting the realm of *Kulturwissenschaften*, Cassirer may be seen as continuing – on a much broader and more detailed scale than Carnap – a project that the latter had already sketched in the *Aufbau*, to wit, the constitution of “cultural objects” (cf. *Aufbau* (§§ 150ff) and Mormann 2006).

Cassirer virtually rehearsed Carnap’s constitution of cultural objects as witnesses of an “objective spirit” that the latter had developed in the *Aufbau* (§55ff, §150-152). This is evidenced by the fact that both Cassirer (cf. ECN5, 7, 131) and Carnap (cf. *Aufbau* §12, §56) referred to Hans Freyer’s Neohegelian *Theorie des objektiven Geistes* (Freyer 1923).¹⁰

A naive physicalism conceived of the physical as something given. In contrast, neo-Kantian transcendental philosophy understood the physical not as “given” (“gegeben”) but as “aufgegeben”, i.e., as something to be constituted in an ongoing process of investigation. Cassirer conceded that Carnap was not a naive physicalist, since in the *Aufbau* he did not take the physical as given, but rather as constituted by the method of quasi-analysis. Nevertheless, Carnap unfortunately clung to a positivist bias when he sought to reconstruct the psychical in terms of the physical. This flaw bereft his constitution theory of the conceptual means to deal adequately with questions concerning psychical and related concepts. As a result, many traditional problems of philosophy were disqualified as pseudoproblems (cf. ECN4, 210, Footnote 11).

In particular, physicalism was mistaken in contending that the expressive function was devoid of cognitive meaning. In fact, logical empiricism had only shown that the expressive phenomena and utterances had no meaning *within* the realm of physicalist discourse, i.e., from the standpoint of physics. It was, however, erroneous to conclude from this that they would be altogether without meaning.

9 For Husserl’s phenomenological constitution of the psychical, see *Cartesian Meditations* §42 – §62 (Husserl 1931).

10 Not for long, however, Freyer’s “objective spirit” enjoyed a good reputation in Carnap’s idearium. Only a few years later, it had become a typical example of a pseudo-concept that could not be translated into honest physicalist terms (cf. Carnap (1932, 73)).

There was cognitive meaning beyond physicalism. Or, as Cassirer put it, “metaphysicalism” does not coincide with “metaphysics” (cf. ECN4, 210).¹¹

For Cassirer philosophy was more than a critique of knowledge. It was essential for a philosophy in its proper sense that it deals with the universe of human symbolization in all its dimensions. Against the Vienna Circle’s thesis that only decidable problems were meaningful problems, Cassirer argued that, although the problem of the psychological may not be decidable on theoretical grounds, it nevertheless was meaningful since it made a practical difference. Carnap admitted such a practical difference (cf. *Aufbau* §11), but insisted, as always, that practical differences were scientifically irrelevant. For him, the practice of science was not an issue which could be discussed in philosophy of science proper, since science as such was concerned only with theoretical knowledge (cf. Carnap (1935, 32)). Consequently, the only task of philosophy of science proper was the purely theoretical analysis of the formal structure of the language of science (ibid., 99).

Although Cassirer rejected physicalism he did not regard it as completely useless. Physicalism had made an important contribution to philosophy of science by clarifying how to distinguish the natural sciences from *Kulturwissenschaften* by pointing out that the expressive function was an indispensable ingredient of the latter, since they necessarily went beyond the physical. For Cassirer a phenomenological analysis revealed that also the expressive function had to play an essential role for an objective human world (cf. ECN 4, 207f). In other words, Cassirer and Carnap are involved in a vigorous virtual debate on the metaphysical character of the expression function.

3. EXPRESSION PERCEPTION

In PSF “expression perception” was mainly related to the symbolic forms of art, language, and myth. In particular, the mythical world conception was characterized by the primacy of expression perception over object perception. For it, there still does not exist a world of things. Everything is perceived as expressing, so to speak, a personal meaning. Only later does science replace expression qualities by sense qualities. It should be noted, however, that the expression function placed an important role for Cassirer’s approach that had not much to do with myth. For instance, it enables us to perceive the three basic phenomena of “I”, “Thou”, and “It” that are needed to get a comprehensive understanding of the world. These basic phenomena do not have much to do with myth but a lot with the *Lebenswelt* in the sense of Husserlian phenomenology. Their irreducibility to phenomena that can be understood in purely physicalist terms was the basis for Cassirer’s rejec-

11 In German, this can be expressed elegantly by distinguishing between “metaphysisch” and “metaphysikalisch”: “Was den ‘Wiener Kreis’ betrifft, so entstehen hier viele Schwierigkeiten daraus, daß viele Probleme als meta-physisch bezeichnet und als solche denunziert werden, die nur meta-physikalisch sind.” (ECN 4, 210).

tion of physicalism: “Experiences of pure expression are not of mediated but of an original character” and “Understanding of expression is prior to knowledge of things” (PSF III, 65).

Carnap’s attempts in the *Aufbau* to constitute the heteropsychological and the physical from an autopsychological base were doomed to fail from the outset for Cassirer since they sought to reduce two of the three basic phenomena, namely “Thou” and “It” to the third (“I”).¹²

In sum, the opposed assessments of the expressive function were the point where Cassirer and Carnap parted ways. I thus propose to read Carnap’s thesis, put forward in (Carnap 1935) that expressive phenomena are sheer metaphysics, as a direct, although anonymous, attack against Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms:

Metaphysical propositions express something, ... but nevertheless they have no sense, no theoretical content.

...

Metaphysical propositions – like lyrical verses – have only an expressive function. ... they lie completely outside the field of knowledge. (Carnap (1935, § 5, *Metaphysics as Expression*, 27, 29))

Cassirer was not alone in contending that the phenomena of “I”, “Thou”, and “It” were irreducible to each other and to anything else. The later Husserl argued for similar theses (cf. ECN 4, 154; Husserl (1931, §49)). According to Husserl, the first “non-I” was an other “I” (the “Thou”), not an “It”. Only later, the subject came to differentiate between various aspects of its world and the objective thing-world appeared. For Cassirer, expression perception was a genuine source of cognition, it was crucial for the foundation for *Kulturwissenschaften*:

The “expression” must be added as a second dimension – as the key for the world of “life”, “soul”, and “mind”. Without it these three worlds would remain closed for ever. From the mere perception of things no path leads to them. (ECN1, *Über Basisphänomene*, 118)

In contrast, Carnap sought to find access to these allegedly non-physicalist worlds through a radically behaviorist reduction that Cassirer rejected as implausible. Instead, he turned the physicalist argument upside-down. The expression perception constituted for every subject the original phenomenon of being in a common world that it shared with other subjects (*koinos kosmos*). Drawing on results from

¹² It may seem doubtful whether Carnap’s “autopsychological” can be identified with the “I” in Cassirer’s or Husserl’s sense (cf. *Aufbau* §65). If this is denied, in Cassirer’s eyes, the expectations for Carnap’s reductionist constitution project looked even bleaker, since then the *Aufbauer* was forced to constitute all three basic phenomena from something more basic than all of them, which, according to Cassirer, was quite impossible.

gestalt psychology Cassirer pointed out that this phenomenon manifested itself already in new-born infants who very early distinguished between faces as friendly and unfriendly, respectively, but did not distinguish between different color spots as a reductionist psychology contended (cf. ECN 4, 153). According to the neo-Kantian “transcendental method” of philosophy to which Cassirer subscribed throughout his entire philosophical career, an unprejudiced scientific philosophy had to acknowledge this kind of facts instead of getting engaged in futile reductionist endeavors.

4. *LEBENSPHILOSOPHIE*

If there was a philosophical current characteristic of philosophy in Germany in the later years of the Wilhelmine Empire and the Weimar republic, it certainly was *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life) (cf. Kusch 1995, Ringer 1969). On the surface, the relation of the logical empiricists of the Vienna Circle to *Lebensphilosophie* was simple. They dismissed *Lebensphilosophie* as unmitigated metaphysical nonsense. Actually, as will be seen, matters were not thus simple. Before coming to this issue let us briefly recall Cassirer’s differentiated attitude to *Lebensphilosophie*. Although neo-Kantian philosophy in general was critical with respect to *Lebensphilosophie* it did not dismiss it out of hand. Cassirer cast his criticism of *Lebensphilosophie* in the same framework as his criticism of metaphysics in general. Already in *Substance and Function*, he had put forward the thesis that a metaphysical philosophical stance usually was characterized by certain absolutized dualistic schemes (cf. SF, 271). Twenty years later, in the so-called fourth volume of *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, he criticised *Lebensphilosophie* as the then reigning version of metaphysics, as an example of such a dualistic thinking:

The opposition of “life” and “spirit” is in the centre of the metaphysics of the 19th and the beginning 20th century. It turns out to be thus determining and decisive that it swallows more and more all the other metaphysical dualisms that have been coined in the history of metaphysics, thereby making them disappear. The oppositions of “being” and “becoming”, “unity” and “plurality”, “matter” and “form”, “soul” and “body” all appear to be dissolved in that one basic antithesis. (ECN1, 7-8).

Cassirer traced back *Lebensphilosophie* to 19th century’s romanticism and took it as evidence of the profound influence that romanticism still had on the “modern and most modern currents of philosophy“ in Germany (cf. Cassirer (1993, 33ff.)). The dualistic tendency of lebensphilosophical metaphysics stood in stark contrast to the philosophy of symbolic forms that aimed to overcome fruitless oppositions, in particular that between *Geist* and *Leben*.

For Carnap the opposition between *Geist* and *Leben* was not an issue that could be discussed in a rational discourse. *Leben* was a realm determined by one’s

Lebensgefühl, not something belonging the ken of rational deliberations and decisions. *Leben* for him was a matter of living one's life and expressing one's feelings and emotions in terms of literature, music, and other arts. There was no point in arguing about one's *Lebensgefühl*.¹³ Nevertheless, "Leben" played an important subliminal role in the Vienna Circle's philosophical *Weltanschauung*. For instance, the *Manifesto* closes with the cryptic remark that "Science serves life, and life receives it" (*Manifesto* 1929, 318). Certainly a resounding final phrase, but its meaning is far from clear, even in its original German. Similarly, in the preface to the first edition of the *Aufbau* one finds the woolly remark:

[W]e feel that there is an inner kinship between the attitude on which our philosophical work is founded and artistic movements ... and in movements which strive for meaningful forms of personal and collective life. ... It is an orientation which demands clarity everywhere, but which realizes that the fabric of life can never quite be apprehended. (*Aufbau*, xviii)

At the end of the day, Carnap subscribed to an unbridgeable gap between science and life, when, at the very end of the *Aufbau*, he approvingly quoted the *Tractatus*:

... We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions are answered, the problems of life have not been touched at all. Of course, there is then no question left, and just this is the answer. (*Aufbau*, § 163)

For Carnap, the dualism between *Geist* and *Leben* was something that could not be dealt with in a rational, scientific manner, it just had to be accepted as such. Nevertheless, although Carnap and the other members of the Vienna Circle hardly ever discussed explicitly philosophers such as Scheler, Klages, or Spengler¹⁴, who counted as protagonists of *Lebensphilosophie*, there is a curious episode in Carnap's most radical physicalist period in which he sought to employ some of Klages's "results" in graphology to foster his project of the physicalization of psychology. In (Carnap 1932/33) Carnap seriously put forward the claim that the physicalization of psychology had already made enormous progress in the area of graphology, mainly due to the achievements of Klages's *Handschrift und Charakter* (Klages 1920) (cf. Carnap 1932/1933, *Physikalisierung in der Graphologie*

13 His radical noncognitivism may be considered as an enduring vestige of this strict separation between "Leben" and "Geist". Still in 1963 Carnap contended that there was no definitive argument in favor or against a democratic or an aristocratic organization of society. Rather, he claimed that it was a matter of one's "character" which one is preferred (cf. Carnap (1963, 1009)).

14 An exception is Neurath's *Anti-Spengler* (Neurath 1921). In this booklet the author straightforwardly attacked Spengler's irrationalism and sought to refute it by rational arguments pointing at its lacunae and non-sequiturs. To put it mildly, the success of *Anti-Spengler* was limited. In contrast, Cassirer in his later writings, e.g. in *The Myth of the State* (Cassirer 1946), showed a much deeper understanding of the role of quasi-mythical thinking in politics.

130 – 136).¹⁵ On the other hand, neo-Kantian philosophers such as Cassirer (but also Rickert) were not prepared to hand over *Leben* and the affairs of social and political practice to irrationalist *Lebensphilosophie*. They sought to come to terms with *Lebensphilosophie* as a discourse that at least partially was susceptible to reasons. In particular, Cassirer vigorously refused to leave the various expression phenomena entirely to the irrational *Leben* (cf. ECN1, *Geist und Leben*).

5. AFFINITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Compared with the often simplistic caricatures of logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle that dominated the opinions of the general philosophical public in later decades Cassirer's image of it was surprisingly modern and detailed – he did not have to wait for modern research of history of philosophy of science to know that the idea of a monolithic Vienna Circle was mistaken. He cleverly spotted the Circle's inner tensions resulting from the different assessments of the roles that perception and logic played as criteria of reality. He set up the following “dialectical” couples: Schlick (objectivistic, “realistic”, “rationalistic”) vs. Mach (sensualistic, psychologistic), Carnap (formalistic, objectivistic, logicistic) vs. Neurath (empiristic, “anarchistic”) (cf. ECN4, 186). While the members of the Vienna Circle always were at pains to mark the allegedly abysmal difference between Vienna and “school philosophy” Cassirer emphasized that, in some respect, there was a close affinity between him and the Viennese logical empiricists:

With respect to the “world view” (“Weltanschauung”), i.e., what I consider to be the ethos of philosophy, there is no other “school” to which I feel closer than to the thinkers of the Vienna Circle – striving for determinateness, exactness, elimination of the only subjec-

15 This was not Carnap's only reference to Klages's oeuvre. Klages's opus maximum (app. 1500 pages) is *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* (Klages 1929 – 1933). Together with Spengler, Klages may be considered as one of the leading figures of the „politics of cultural despair“ (Fritz Stern) that plagued Weimar Germany and eventually led to disaster. According to Klages “the essence of the historical process of mankind, often called ‘progress’, is the victorious battle of the spirit (Geist) against life (Leben) with the logical end of the latter.” (Klages (1929 – 1933), 68). Klages made a great impression on Carnap. In some notes that he had jotted down for a talk in Dessau in October 1929 (RC-110-07-49--1) one reads: “Can science be a guide for life? The answer will be No. Or does the spirit kill life? Also No. ... Klages ‘Leben’ contra ‘Geist’. If the powers of life are mighty enough, they need not fear the spirit (Goethe).” Traces of Klages's “characterology” may still be found in his later works when Carnap referred to the individual's “character” as the main source of his moral convictions (cf. Carnap 1963, 1009). Around the same time, Neurath pursued the abstruse (and eventually abandoned) physicalist project to translate Freud's psychoanalysis into a physicalist language.

A mischievous observer might have come to the conclusion that in the 1930s physicalism had a curious inclination toward pseudo-sciences.

tive and “feel-good philosophy”, application of the analytical method, rigorous conceptual analysis – these are all requirements that I also recognize. (ECN4, 206)

Nevertheless, Cassirer pointed out, there remained fundamental differences between him and the Viennese thinkers in what they considered as the *task* of philosophy. For the logical empiricists of the Vienna Circle philosophy was philosophy of science. In Cassirer’s terms, for them, philosophy was restricted to *Erkenntniskritik*. In contrast, his own conception of philosophy was much more comprehensive. As the texts of ECN evidence Cassirer took into account virtually the entire range of philosophical currents in German philosophy, from Klages to Carnap, Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger, so to speak, to say nothing about his literacy in linguistics, theory of art, psychology, and ethnology. Compared with this wide spectrum that of the Vienna Circle’s was utterly narrow. From the 1930s onwards the Vienna Circle’s attitude became more and more that of a philosophical movement that had largely lost interest in the theses and opinions of those who did not belong to the movement. Traditional philosophical currents were routinely disqualified as “metaphysical” without further discussion. This did not exclude the possibility of forging strategic alliances when this appeared to be expedient, but, by and large, the members of the former Vienna Circle were sure they were standing on the right, anti-metaphysical side. The verdicts on metaphysical aberrations basically remained intact, even if they underwent some verbal cosmetics insofar as allegedly non-empirical and non-analytical assertions were no longer harshly dismissed as meaningless, but classified as “cognitively meaningless”. Even after the turn to “tolerance” none of the usual suspects was acquitted.

A certain shortsightedness in Cassirer’s perspective of the Vienna Circle may be seen in the fact that he considered physicalism as an essential trait of logical empiricism. Nevertheless, he had taken notice of *Syntax* (ECN 4, Footnote 539) and explicitly admitted that his critique of a dogmatically physicalist empiricism no longer was applicable to this version of the allegedly new “tolerant” empiricism. To me, it seems doubtful whether the new tolerance announced in *Syntax* had any measurable effect on the Carnap-Cassirer debate.¹⁶

Be this as it may, there remained other essential differences between Carnap’s logical empiricism and Cassirer’s critical idealism that survived the abandonment of strict physicalism. According to Cassirer, logical empiricism was deeply “un-Kantian”¹⁷ in that it put foundational “structure” at center stage, neglecting the role of “function”. In contrast,

16 In contrast, Carus recently proposed to interpret the Carnap of *Syntax* as the founding father of a new kind of philosophy based on the notion of tolerance and characterized by an irreducible plurality of conceptual frameworks, each of which being allowed to flourish in its own right (cf. Carus 2007).

17 Anti-Kantianism was especially virulent among the members of the “left wing” of the Vienna Circle, i.e., Neurath, Frank, and Hahn. But also for Schlick quite a lot of anti-Kantian statements can be found.

[w]e emphasize the functional side, not the foundational side, but of course we do not deny the necessity of a base. In this respect we are really empirists. All our activity never leads us beyond the basis in an absolute sense, it leads us to orientation, articulation, “structuring”, and systematization of the base. On the other hand, we point out that this structuring is not given as such, but constituted by certain “functions” – it has not only to be found, but constructed. (ECN4, 215)

The principle of the primacy of function over structure is just another formulation of the basic principle of the “transcendental method” characteristic for Marburg neo-Kantianism in general. According to it, philosophy does not operate in empty space but had to rely on the historically established facts of science, language, ethics, art, religion, and myth that provided it with its proper content. The task of philosophy is to “justify” these symbolic productions of the human spirit by elucidating their basic assumptions and principles thereby understanding and making proper sense of them. Thereby, along with the function of cognition the philosopher had to strive to understand the functions of linguistic thinking, mythical and religious thinking, and the function of artistic perception, all of which disclosed to humanity not substantial different worlds but rather different ways of world making – to borrow a phrase from Nelson Goodman who may be considered as Cassirer’s most kindred spirit among analytic philosophers.

In Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms the critique of reason becomes a critique of enlightened culture, i.e., a culture for which science plays a pre-eminent role but which does not neglect the other symbolic forms. As Cassirer pointed out, the concept of culture, however, cannot be detached from the fundamental forms and directions of human activity: in the general framework of a philosophy of culture “being“ can be apprehended only in terms of “doing“.

As has been observed by many authors, in the logical empiricist account practical and pragmatic aspects of science have remained strangely underdeveloped. According to the Viennese conception, philosophy and science were essentially theoretical. Arguably, in its most radical form, this claim was put forward by Carnap (cf. Carnap 1934, 1963), but in the final analysis, practical reason in some classical Kantian sense did not exist for virtually all members of the Vienna Circle.¹⁸ Instead, practical problems were ultimately relegated to the realms of “character”, *Lebensgefühl*, and merely instrumental rationality (cf. Carnap 1963). Cassirer had a more comprehensive idea of philosophy and its role in the ongoing struggle for a rational and enlightened society.

18 This contention needs some further arguments, in particular, for the case of Neurath, whom many consider as the representative of a full-blown pragmatist philosophy of science. Evidence for the claim that Neurath’s “pragmatism” was perhaps less pragmatist than often believed is the fact that he sided with Carnap against Morris when a reconciliation of logical empiricism and American pragmatism was discussed on the *International Congress for Unified Science* that took place 1935 in Paris (cf. Mormann 2012).

It may be tempting to somehow relate the virtual debate between the Vienna Circle's logical empiricism and Cassirer's critical idealism to contemporary philosophical debates dealing with the relation between analytical and continental philosophy in our time. I'm not sure whether this is really useful. In particular, it may be rash to interpret the Cassirer-Carnap debate as an early attempt to overcome the allegedly obsolete gap between continental and analytic philosophy. Rather, taking notice of Cassirer's immensely rich philosophical legacy, as is now possible in the excellently edited volumes of ECN, constitutes in itself a philosophical pleasure that no one should forego, who has more than a slight interest in the thought of one of the great figures of 20th Century German enlightenment philosophy.

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University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU
Department of Logic and Philosophy of Science
20080 Donostia-San Sebastián
Spain
ylxmomot@sf.ehu.es