

The Method of Culture

Ernst Cassirer's Philosophy
of Symbolic Forms

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Symbolic Forms and the Logic of the Cultural Sciences:

Cassirer in Context and Influence

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1. Introduction

What do we mean by a “philosophy of culture”? One interpretation is a philosophy of those societies that have formed a recognized culture. Just as one can do textual history only of societies with the ability to write, one could argue that the philosophy of culture is properly speaking done only with respect to societies with a culture that meets certain criteria. That is very far from how Ernst Cassirer conceived of the philosophy of culture¹. Ernst Wolfgang Orth observes, “[f]or him [Cassirer], the ‘philosophy of symbolic forms’ is to be considered as the ‘prolegomena to a future philosophy of culture’ (1938). The ‘[Kantian] critique of reason’ – for Cassirer, the ultimate metaphysics, even as critique – is transformed inevitably with Cassirer into a ‘critique of culture’” (Orth 2013, 556-557).

Cassirer rejected a picture according to which the “forms” of human culture and science can be reduced to the relation between those forms and the external world, a world, as Orth puts it, “‘beyond’ or ‘behind’ the world of appearances”. What Cassirer focuses on, instead, is “the internal variety, abundance, and diversity of the ‘phenomena themselves’, insofar as they manifest themselves in the process of symbolic formation of the human world” (Orth 2013, 556-557). The aim of the philosophy of symbolic forms is not to find a one-to-one fit between the forms and the external world. Instead, symbolic forms

¹ For Cassirer on culture see LUFT 2015, ORTH 2011, 2013, IKONEN 2011, MATHERNE 2015.

themselves are the phenomena to be analyzed: their structure and development, and the relations between them, illuminate the “symbolic formation of the human world” – a world that includes social and cultural interactions and phenomena.

The subject of this paper is Cassirer’s analysis of the logic of the cultural sciences². One might ask what could possibly unify the cultural sciences in Cassirer’s view, since he describes the relevant phenomena as comprising *any* “effort to comprehend the world”. The unification comes, not from reference to what lies beyond the appearances, but to the structure of the efforts to comprehend the world, including the cultural and social worlds we inhabit³. The central problem for *Wissenschaft* in general that Cassirer identifies, the problem of “objectivization”, has two facets. The first is recognizing objects as such. The second is showing that our knowledge of those objects is, in fact, “objective”, in a sense that Cassirer analyzes differently in different stages of his career.

Friedman (2000) has argued that Cassirer’s view entails that the *Geisteswissenschaften* share in the ‘universal validity’ of the *Naturwissenschaften*, but that Cassirer did not show how this was to be achieved, or how, if the types of validity were different, they were to be related to each other. Krois (2010) responds that Cassirer’s notion of “symbolic pregnancy” is a significant clue to his view of validity in the cultural sciences. “Symbolic pregnancy” is one aspect of Cassirer’s account of the symbol, of linguistic form, and of the structures analyzed in the cultural and life sciences. To understand these, it is also necessary to explain Cassirer’s relationship to the other practitioners of *Wissenschaft* whose work he followed. Krois had emphasized in earlier work the relevance of Gestalt psychology and especially of Cassirer’s cousin and friend Kurt Goldstein (Krois 1992). In recent work, Frederik Stjernfelt has emphasized Cassirer’s relationship to the biologist Jakob von Uexküll (Stjernfelt 2011); and I have emphasized the influence of the founders

² The most direct, obvious translation of Cassirer’s *Logik der Kulturwissenschaften*.

³ See ORTH 2011 for discussion of the latter point.

of *Völkerpsychologie*, Moritz Lazarus and especially Heymann Steinthal (Patton 2004, 2014-2015).

I will discuss two aspects of the role of the symbolic, of logic, and of language in Ernst Cassirer's thought. First, that phenomena including linguistic expression and psychological categorization are processes that can be analyzed using a "logic", where "logic" is here used in a sense Cassirer borrowed from late nineteenth century *Erkenntnistheorie* and from Heymann Steinthal's linguistics. The logical analysis of symbols and culture will be contrasted with Kantian and neo-Kantian approaches. Second, given this picture of logic, the development of the "expressive function" of language, and even of the representational function, can be analyzed as autonomous from universal *a priori* logical structures, but still analyzable in terms of the applied logic of *Erkenntnistheorie*. Cassirer defends a common understanding of the cultural sciences via logic, but not *a priori* logic.

2. Logic and Nature in the Sciences

Ernst Cassirer is well known as the scion of the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism, but his philosophy of culture goes well beyond earlier neo-Kantian accounts – Disceanna (2014) even reads him within the rhetorical tradition. The early move away from doctrinal neo-Kantianism in Cassirer was his concern with language: "The first step in [Cassirer's] 'Loslösung' [departure] from Neo-Kantianism occurred when, in the *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, [...] [i]nstead of asking about how 'knowledge' was possible, Cassirer asked about the conditions of the possibility of our ways of 'understanding' the world and of understanding one another in language" (Krois 1992, 439; see also Krois 2011, 10-12). Cassirer's incorporation of language and of cultural phenomena goes well beyond Cohen's. In Cassirer's words, "[Cohen] saw the essential nature of the transcendental method therein that this method always began with a factum, but then he narrowed down this general definition – begin with a factum in order to ask about the possibility of

this factum – so that again and again the thing most worth asking about was mathematical science. Kant did not limit things in this way. I ask about the possibility of the factum of language. How is it, how is it conceivable, that we are able to understand one another from *Dasein* to *Dasein* in this medium?”⁴.

Samantha Matherne locates Cassirer’s analysis of “objective understanding” in his revision to Kantian transcendental logic. Kant’s conception focused on the transcendental conditions of knowledge, involving the rules for employing *a priori* concepts to objects of a possible experience. Cassirer extends the notion of “experience” to encompass “cultural experience more broadly, as it unfolds in myth, religion, art, and language [...] When approached from the latter perspective, Cassirer’s transcendental logic ceases to be the logic of objective cognition and becomes, instead, the logic of *objective understanding*” (Matherne 2018, 146). Another way of putting this is to say that Cassirer focused his analysis of “experience” on a set of specific cultural forms of experience that Kant never considered in particular. Kant never provided an analysis of how we experience myth or language, for instance. But Kant did think that we have experience of artworks and other cultural phenomena, which he analyzes in detail in the third *Critique*. Nonetheless, Kant did not think cultural experience was the basis of objective knowledge. Cassirer formulates a logic of objective *understanding* to encompass the type of understanding that arises from forms of cultural experience. This may not be “understanding” in Kant’s sense, because that would involve knowledge. Rather, Cassirer’s ‘objective understanding’ seems to have a more colloquial meaning: how we are able to understand each other.

Cassirer wishes to preserve the autonomy of the cultural world from explanations in terms of materialist or physicalist reduction, and even from *a priori* or metaphysical explanations in terms of logic. Kinzel (2018) has argued, for instance, that Dilthey sought a foundation for the human sciences in psychology. In contrast, Cassirer did not attempt to find a single foun-

⁴ Krois refers the reader to pp. 246-268 of Cassirer’s remarks in *DD*.

dation or a *a priori* method for the cultural sciences⁵. This is how the problem of the unity of the cultural sciences arises for Cassirer. Still, in *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, he does argue that the logic of the title does exist. How is that possible?

In my view, what Cassirer means by “logic” often is misunderstood. And despite the fact that Cassirer departed from the neo-Kantian approaches in some ways, by the “logic” of cultural sciences Cassirer means a type of logic that is found in classical *Erkenntnistheorie*, in writers including Heymann Steinthal, Heinrich Maier, and Friedrich Albert Lange. At the end of the nineteenth century, a Festschrift was organized for Christoph Sigwart. Maier took the opportunity to take stock of the field, noting that “it has become common in modern logic to conceive of the foundations of logical investigation with respect to the doctrine of method [*Methodenlehre*]”. Maier observes a profound “reform of logic” over the last few decades of the nineteenth century: “Its guiding idea is to seek out logical thought in scientific knowledge [*Erkennen*], in scientific methods. Thus, logic becomes a doctrine of the structures and laws of scientific thought”. Late nineteenth century logicians converged, according to Maier, on the view that “the primary object of logic is that type of thought that finds expression in acts of judgment”⁶.

The conception of logic in this passage, which appears in a paper called *Logik und Erkenntnistheorie* (1900), is remarkably pluralist: any “type of thought that finds expression in acts of judgment”. Still, it excludes from view all non-discursive thought, thought that does not end in or at least is not intended to end in conceptual judgment. It thus distinguishes sharply between thought that eventuates in judgment, and de-

⁵ I do not insist on a rigid distinction in this paper between the *Kulturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. However, this difference between Dilthey and Cassirer is one way to make it. While Cassirer analyzed the facts of culture and tried to find the structures immanent in them, if KINZEL (2018) is correct, Dilthey tried to find a psychological foundation for the *Geisteswissenschaften*.

⁶ MAIER 1900, 219-221, my translation. For more on post-Kantian logic, see LAPOINTE 2018.

scriptions of thought in general: “This excludes from logical interest a considerable number of the functions that one usually includes in the description of thought. Involuntary appearances and spontaneous visitations of perceptions or representations, the uncontrolled play of the course of an idea and voluntary reproduction, the intentional dissolution of series of thoughts for some reason, intuition that withdraws from discursive connections [...] – all this belongs in the pre-logical sphere of thought”⁷.

Maier’s description of the “reform of logic” at the end of the nineteenth century describes Cassirer’s break with Kantian logic in his philosophy of culture rather well. Cassirer, too, excludes non-discursive thought from “logic”, even his very catholic “logic” of the cultural sciences. This is the realm of the “expressive function” in the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*: language can have an expressive function, but that does not mean it is a part of or governed by *logic*. Cassirer means for myth, language, the expressive function, and the basic forms of symbolization and expression to be included as phenomena to be analyzed by the cultural sciences, and he refers to them as *Basisphänomene* or “basis phenomena” (Krois 1992). Why, then, does he exclude them from the logic of those sciences?

It is very plausible that Cassirer is following his mentor Chajim (Heymann) Steinthal⁸. Steinthal was one of the founders of *Völkerpsychologie*, “ethnopsychology”, along with Moses (Moritz) Lazarus⁹. Lazarus and Steinthal analyzed, not the Hegelian Geist, but the *Volksgeist*. The *Volksgeist* is made manifest in artefacts of culture, which are analyzed into the expressive and representational structures they contain¹⁰. In Steinthal’s 1871 *Outline of the Science of Language* (hereafter *Outline*), Steinthal announces a “science” of language, in which

⁷ MAIER 1900, 219-221, my translation. See chapter 1 in PATTON 2004.

⁸ See PATTON 2014-2015.

⁹ The school of *Völkerpsychologie* influenced Hermann Cohen, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Georg Simmel, as well as Cassirer. See KUSCH 2019, EDGAR 2020, REINERS 2020, SKIDELSKY 2003.

¹⁰ See the introductions to LAZARUS and STEINTHAL 1860 and 1862.

he analyzes language as a natural phenomenon: thought, categories, concepts, and expression are developed, not acquired or inborn, and they contribute to the construction of language as a formal structure.

Steinthal's fundamental position in the *Outline* is that language is an organic, natural phenomenon that escapes the boundaries of *a priori* laws of thought. Human language develops on its own, unconstrained by prior decisions about conceptual categories or means of expression: "language, independently of logic, establishes its forms in complete autonomy" (Steinthal 1871, 62). Steinthal's *Outline* probably is the source of Cassirer's account of the expressive function, as Steinthal argues that language has an expressive form that is independent of its logical or representational content¹¹.

But a very significant distinction must be kept in mind here. Just because language develops independently of logic, that does not mean that language cannot be *explained* or *understood* using logic, especially using the methodological logic of *Erkenntnistheorie* described above by Maier, with which Steinthal, like Cassirer, was intimately familiar. As Steinthal remarks, that applied logic was developed to capture the inferential forms found in nature.

Physics, chemistry, mathematics, and so on are not logical, nature is not logical, that is, no logical facts, categories, and laws are given in them; but they certainly are very logical, because their developments are carried out according to the laws of logic [...] The object of the special sciences is specific to them, not only their matter [*Stoff*], but also the general relationships that appear in them, which one even calls categories, like the knowledge of chemical substances [*Stoffe*] and the relationships according to which they are connected to each other, like sphere, circumference, diameter¹².

Again, Steinthal's "logic" in this passage is the methodological, applied logic of the later tradition of *Erkenntnistheorie* that Meier summarizes, above. That logic is a kind of structur-

¹¹ PATTON 2014-2015, 108-109 and *passim*.

¹² STEINTHAL 1871, 69, my translation.

al analysis of structures and forms that are taken to have developed independently of logic itself: "Insofar as our capacity for rational thought stretches to these objects and their relationships, then here it proceeds in a way in which the forms of logic are visible; for logic is the analysis of thought, that is, of the capacity of thought, in abstraction from the objects to which it is applied"¹³. Steinthal goes beyond this familiar picture, that logic consists of the abstract analysis of rules of thought, with the view that logic traces the process of *production* of objects in nature: "Even more: nature produces objects, and carries this out through media and methods that the special sciences have as their particular object to represent. Insofar as we represent this way of proceeding in thought and represent the real path of the development of the thing by a subjective, conceptual copy, we perceive in thought not bare logical relationships, but [logical relationships] in actual nature itself that live within it, logical laws that it follows faithfully"¹⁴. Here, Steinthal observes that if logic is to trace the production of objects and phenomena in nature, then logic does not merely represent our thought about categories and concepts, but also about the "real path of the development of the thing".

Steinthal argues that this analysis applies to the development of language as well. We can trace, not just the categories that evolve in language, but also the path of development of linguistic relationships:

Just as with nature and the natural sciences, language and linguistics are also logical and not logical: namely, their object with its relationships is specific to them; but insofar as one thinks this object and these relationships, the logician perceives both that the linguistic researcher acts according to logical laws, and that logical considerations and laws have unconsciously governed the process of language, in forming its elements and combining them according to their specific laws. These logical laws, which language and linguistic researchers, chemists and physicists and nature follow, are the common logical

¹³ STEINTHAL 1871, 69, my translation.

¹⁴ STEINTHAL 1871, 69-70, my translation.

laws, whose demonstration the researcher into language and nature presupposes, that he does not investigate, that are not his particular object (Steinthal 1871, 70).

This is exactly the position that can be found in Cassirer's work on the formal structures discovered in language and in culture more generally¹⁵. In fact, Steinthal's emphasis on finding logical 'real' 'relationships' as opposed to abstract categories is an earlier anticipation of Cassirer's critique of Aristotelian emphasis on 'thing-concepts' over 'function-concepts' in Chapter 1 of *Substance and Function*. Accordingly, we find a similar tension here in Steinthal that has been found already in Cassirer by numerous commentators. Steinthal asserts that language develops independently of logic, but he also argues that "logical considerations and laws have unconsciously governed the process of language, in forming its elements and combining them according to their specific laws" (Steinthal 1871, 70).

Cassirer, similarly, argues that the expressive function of language is not logical or law-governed, but also that language and even experience are aimed at communication and objectivization, both of which require logic. And, just as Steinthal does, Cassirer argues that the "objects" of cultural research are already found within the products of culture, even though they have not been consciously put there: even myth has an objectivizing tendency. This tension can be found in the second study of *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, *The Perception of Things and the Perception of Expression*, where "Cassirer essentially rehearses the content of his theory of symbolic pregnance [*symbolische Pregnanz*], though in different language and without himself remarking upon it. Perception has 'in its simple phenomenal state [...] to some extent, a double face'. It divides into the 'perception of things' [*Dingwahrnehmung*] and the 'perception of expression' [*Ausdruckswahrnehmung*]. Both are in fact culturally generated"¹⁶.

Friedman's critical point about Cassirer and the *Geisteswis-*

¹⁵ See *PSFI*, chapter 1.

¹⁶ Cited in KROIS 2011, 126.

senschaften can thus be made more pointed. First, it is important to clarify that, in most of his work, Cassirer is concerned with what he calls the *Kulturwissenschaften*, a point to which I will return in the final section. These need not be governed by a Hegelian logic of the unfolding of *Geist*, and need not be given an *a priori* foundation. Second, of course, this makes Friedman's point more, not less, pressing. How, if culture develops independently from logic, is it to be given a unified logical method or analysis? How can there be *one* human culture? Cassirer does argue that there is one human culture, but how can he?

3. *One Common Objective Human World: Living Forms and Perception*

The logic of late *Erkenntnistheorie* is not taken to be a logic that *governs* the development of the natural processes or phenomena under analysis, but rather one that *describes* the formal and structural aspects of that development and of the resulting phenomena. As Cassirer himself remarked, this sort of analysis made cultural artefacts similar to the biological structures studied by Cuvier and von Uexküll (see Stjernfelt 2011). It is crucial for Cassirer that he keep the functional analysis of biological organisms and of mental processes distinct from the structural description of those organisms and processes.

Cassirer's complex response to the debates over vitalism and free will involved invoking a Kantian purposiveness without a purpose, arguing that one can build legitimate functional models of organisms and of consciousness without in any way asserting that those models are reducible to – or even accurate descriptions of – the organisms and minds themselves. According to Uexküll, living 'form' cannot be divorced from the relationships it encodes, and cannot be accounted for by giving descriptions of the 'force and matter' that embodies those relations: "Uexküll argues that biological form has a status parallel to that of geometry, i.e. irreducibly spatial relations which may never be reduced to their material basis. Geometrical form is thus a construct wrongly rejected by Darwinism and material-

ism, for any true biological description must necessarily resort not only to force and matter, but also to form. Thus, it is only form, and the related concept of ‘typical development,’ which allows biology to perform deductions” (Stjernfelt 2011, 178). Uexküll’s program for the life sciences concentrates on research into structure and form as well as force and matter: “Uexküll’s research program is seen as one of *Strukturforschung*, and its implicit dismissal of a Drieschian notion of entelechy opens the gates for a completely new knowledge interest in Uexküll: that of form as an autonomous problem. Purpose is here taken, not as a separate force, but as *Zweckmässigkeit*, purposiveness, lying in the very structural composition of biological entities, in their *Planmässigkeit*, their plan-like structure” (Stjernfelt 2011, 178). The analysis of structures, of functions that are based on forms, is what allows for explanation and deduction in biology. This structural analysis, however, does not have to be causal. As Cassirer later observes, Uexküll “could dismiss the causal problem of physics and chemistry if only it were recognized that causality is not the whole of science and that there is an independent problem of form, for which biology has to develop its own concepts and methods of thought. Once this was granted, the conflict between mechanism and vitalism was over so far as Uexküll was concerned. He was interested in the fact that there is a nonmaterial *ordering*, a *rule of the living process* that gives to organic matter whatever arrangement it may have” (EPW 1, 235 [202]). Uexküll’s approach focuses on the structural ordering of processes.

While Stjernfelt goes on to note Cassirer’s criticisms of Uexküll, it is intriguing to consider the similarities between Uexküll’s structural analysis of biological organisms and Steinthal’s structural analysis of natural language. In Steinthal’s *Outline of the Science of Language*, the “expressive form” of language plays the role of Uexküll’s living form; the applied logic of *Erkenntnistheorie* plays the role of Uexküll’s “nonmaterial ordering”; and *a priori*, law-governed logic plays the role of natural-scientific, mechanistic, causal explanations in the life sciences. The idea of “form as an autonomous problem” is implicit in

Steinthal's analysis of language as well. Steinthal's "expressive form" of language is independent of *a priori* logic just as Uexküll's biological form is independent of law-governed, causal explanation.

The crucial point here is that the applied logic of late *Erkenntnistheorie* – of Maier, Steinthal, and (I argue) Cassirer – is not a universal, absolute, deterministic logic. It is neither Hegel's absolute spirit nor even Kant's transcendental logic that asserts *a priori* categories of thought as necessary conditions for objective knowledge. The basis for the unity of the cultural sciences – even of the unity of explanations in the life sciences – for Cassirer must come from basic, observable phenomena. In biology, we are able to appeal to specific structures that make possible an explanation in terms of *Planmäßigkeit*: being constructed *as if* according to a plan. In the case of language, our ability to communicate and to explain comes from the fact that we are able to construct languages and expressions that are the basis of mutual understanding (an ability that rests on even more basic phenomena revealed in perception, which may rest on even more basic neurological and biological capacities, and so on). In the case of language, the explanation provided for the unity of language as a cultural phenomenon is not a hypothetical explanation. Instead, it is an explanation in terms of what to Cassirer is an indisputable fact, the fact that humans are able to develop languages that other humans, with sufficient effort, are able to understand. Thus, Cassirer appeals to "one common objective human world in which, although the differences of individuals are in no way cancelled, a bridge is built from individual to individual". Here, we find the basis for what Matherne, above, referred to as the notion of "objective understanding" in Cassirer. Cassirer notes that he finds this basis

again and again in the primal phenomenon of language. Everyone speaks his own language, and yet we understand each other through the medium of language. There is something such as the language, something such as a unity over and above the endlessly different ways of speaking. Therein lies the decisive point for me. And therefore, I start from the objectivity of the symbolic Form because here the "in-

conceivable is achieved". That is what I should like to call the world of objective spirit. There is no other way from one existence [*Dasein*] to another existence [*Dasein*] than through this world of Form. If it did not exist, then I would not know how such a thing as common understanding could be¹⁷.

This statement by Cassirer, made during the Davos disputation with Heidegger, is perhaps one of those passages that Friedman was considering when he said Cassirer did not provide a logic of the cultural sciences¹⁸. If we think of "logic" as a set of unifying *a priori* principles that govern, for instance, the construction of language, then it seems that that logic should be the source of the unification of language in the above passage. But it should be clear by now that this is not the type of logic Cassirer means. Instead, Cassirer means that the human ability to construct logically analyzable linguistic structures results in "endlessly different" structures – but that, nonetheless, we are able to build bridges between any two such structures. That fact is not guaranteed by *a priori* logic, but by the "primal phenomenon" of linguistic expression, which is suited to the purpose of communication between individuals. The ability to represent content, and to communicate that content, is located neither in the subject nor in the object, but in the relation between the two¹⁹.

It may be true that we all have access to a "primal" or basic level of phenomenal experience or expressive form. But that level is distinguished, in Cassirer, from the representative function of language and of structures of knowledge in general. What, then, is to guarantee that the basic phenomenal content of any person's experience or the basic form of any person's linguistic expression can be communicated to any other person? Even if that communication is via representational structures, one cannot refer to the representational structures themselves in giving

¹⁷ DD 201-202, cited in DISCENNA 2014, 255.

¹⁸ There is a relevant discussion of this facet of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* in § 4 of FRIEDMAN 2011.

¹⁹ For detailed analysis of the Marburg notion of 'experience' see RICHARDSON 2003.

an answer. Then one ends up deep in the thicket of inter-translation between representational and inferential structures, and Cassirer explicitly does not intend to appeal to structural inter-translation as a source of the unity of the “human world”, but to a common basic level of perception and expression.

To do justice to Cassirer’s complex solution to the problem, one would need to appeal – at least – to two sources of the unity of cultural consciousness: a *holistic* unity and a *basic* unity. Holistic unity stems from Cassirer’s account of organisms in biology, including the notion of form in living organisms as found in Goethe, Cuvier, and Uexküll (Krois 1992; Stjernfelt 2011). The holistic unity is that which results from hypothetical *Planmäßigkeit*, or being structured *as if* according to a plan. An analysis of the structure of a whole, even a hypothetical whole, shows how the structure can be regarded as a plan or blueprint for a unified construction. Moreover, each part of the structure can be regarded as making the holistic unity possible. All this can be done without arguing that there is an *a priori* plan according to which the whole was constructed. The cultural world can be considered as a structural or formal whole without being unified under *a priori* laws or principles.

Basic unity, for Cassirer, is founded on the character of phenomenal experience, and especially on two factors: (1) Basis phenomena [*Basisphänomene*] (see, e.g., Krois 2011), and (2) The interaction between symbolic ideation (symbolic consciousness) and sensory consciousness²⁰. Clues to how Cassirer saw these two elements interacting can be found in Cassirer’s intellectual relationship to his cousin Kurt Goldstein. With his collaborator, the Gestalt psychologist Adhémar Gelb, Goldstein performed experiments that, according to Cassirer, demonstrate the relationship between “symbolic consciousness” and “sensory consciousness”²¹. In a letter to Goldstein,

²⁰ See, e.g., NCW 25 [CASSIRER 1999, 666].

²¹ NCW 25 [CASSIRER 1999, 661]. The influence of Goldstein on Cassirer is very well known and has been analyzed in detail (e.g., GURWITSCH 1949, KROIS 1992). In a 2020 paper, Mazviita Chirimuuta traces the mutual influence between Goldstein’s work in biology and living forms and Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (CHIRIMUUTA 2020).

Cassirer remarks that the “genuinely symbolic (i.e., the use of something sensible as a pure sign, as the material carrier of meaning) is always a relatively late achievement of development. This achievement must first pass through various stages which are closer to the prior, immediately-sensory stages of conduct”²². Here we find a particularly clear statement of the idea of symbolic pregnance. Perceptual experience, for Cassirer, always involves an interaction between the symbolic and the sensible. But the symbolic element of consciousness takes time and practice to achieve (*PSF* I). In certain types of perceptual experience, then, we are not presented with bare sensory givens, but with complex objects that have been constructed in a process that moves from the “‘mimetic’ to the ‘analogical’ up to the ‘purely-symbolical’”²³. If we can show how the symbolic meaning of perceptual experience has been constructed from basis phenomena, then we can communicate how the cultural objects we have constructed were built, and therefore the origin of our comprehension of them²⁴.

Steinthal’s analysis of logic as tracing the processes of thought and knowledge provides the basis for a ‘logical’ evaluation of expression, communication, understanding, and explanation in the cultural sciences. However, as shown above, Cassirer provides a very similar analysis of symbolic forms in his readings of Uexküll in the life sciences, and of Goldstein in psychology. For Steinthal and Cassirer, formal analysis does not merely divide a field of study into distinct conceptual categories and functional relationships between them. Rather, it traces and emerges from processes in nature, and from the processes of comprehending, expressing, and explaining in human mental life.

The basis of the “unity” of the human, cultural, and natural sciences in Cassirer is thus not any functional or relational reduction of thing-concepts to observables, for instance (as in

²² NCW 25 [CASSIRER 1999, 661-662, translation amended].

²³ NCW 25 [CASSIRER 1999, 661].

²⁴ Cassirer’s debt to psychological accounts like Goldstein’s must be weighed against well-known arguments by the Marburg School against “psychologism”. For Natortorp’s anti-psychologism see EDGAR 2015.

rival reductionist accounts from early philosophy of science). Rather, Cassirer bases his analysis on the fact that social and expressive communication is a natural process, just as population dynamics or combustion are natural processes. In both cases, the basis for our understanding of those processes is the construction of a language that expresses the internal logic of the process and phenomena, and that allows for objective communication of the symbolic forms embodied in them.

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