

Book Review

Luigi Filieri, Anne Pollok, (eds). 2021. *The Method of Culture. Ernst Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Pisa: Edizioni ETS, pp.295, ISBN 8846761006, 9788846761002

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In the last two decades, scholarly interest in the exiled philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) has led to various contributions that locate his works within the philosophical landscape at the time. Michael Freidman's *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger* (2000),¹ Ursula Renz's *Die Rationalität der Kultur* (2002),² Sebastian Luft's *The Space of Culture. Towards a Neo-Kantian Philosophy of Culture* (Cohen, Natorp & Cassirer) (2015),³ Gregory Moss's *Ernst Cassirer and the Autonomy of Language* (2015),⁴ Samantha Matherne's *Ernst Cassirer* (2021),⁵ and the recently published Special Issue on "Cassirer's Children" in the *Journal of Transcendental Philosophy*⁶—to name only a few—are invaluable sources that have (re-)introduced Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms to the philosophical community after a long period of neglect. However, works that connect various interpretations and promote an interdisciplinary discussion on how to understand the rich methodological aspects of Cassirer's system are still rare.

The volume *The Method of Culture. Ernst Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, edited by Anne Pollok and Luigi Filieri, provides well-researched contributions to fill this desideratum. The volume answers to the "renaissance" of Cassirer scholarship (p. 13) by combining various articles tackling fundamental questions regarding Cassirer's philosophy or "method" of culture. The crucial problem in Cassirer's philosophy is the following. On the one hand, Cassirer's

1 Friedman, M. (2000). *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger*. (Chicago: Open Court).

2 Renz, U. (2002). *Die Rationalität der Kultur: Zur Kulturphilosophie und ihrer transzendentalen Begründung bei Cohen, Natorp und Cassirer*. (Hamburg: Meiner).

3 Luft, S. (2015). *The Space of Culture. Towards a Neo-Kantian Philosophy of Culture* (Cohen, Natorp & Cassirer). (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

4 Moss, G. S. (2015). *Ernst Cassirer and the Autonomy of Language*. (Lanham: Lexington Books).

5 Matherne, S. (2021). *Ernst Cassirer*. (Oxfordshire: Routledge).

6 Massimo, F., Luft, S. (2021). *Cassirer's Children*, Special Topics Issue (*Journal of Transcendental Philosophy*, Vol. II).

philosophy of culture aims to look at the material instantiations of symbolic forms in order to understand the *animal symbolicum* better. To tackle these forms, Cassirer adheres to a descriptive method that treats all symbolic forms equally and autonomously, each to be analyzed in its own architectural structure. On the other hand, Cassirer's philosophy of culture is characterized by a "normative" or teleological moment as the symbolic forms strive towards a more reflective and self-liberating cultural stage. What *prima facie* sounds like a confession to German-Idealist dualism is complicated by the fact that Cassirer refrains from an "abstract universal set of logical rules," as the editor Luigi Filieri notes (p. 27). The complex relation between the symbolic forms and Cassirer's account of unity also requires special scholarly attention because Cassirer spent little effort on spelling out his philosophical and methodological presuppositions. As the editor Anne Pollok puts it: "Among Cassirer scholars, there is some sort of agreement that Cassirer makes it hard to explicate a purely philosophical standpoint" (p. 15).

There are three recurring questions implicitly guiding the papers in this volume.

- (1) Does Cassirer provide a complete set of symbolic forms, and, if so, on what philosophical presuppositions are they grounded?
- (2) What philosophical traditions influenced Cassirer's thinking (particularly his Idealism)?
- (3) What hermeneutical method or "symbolic" language is used in Cassirer's own historiographical method?

While these questions are often treated as closely intertwined, I shall take them as the structuring guidelines to briefly sketch the positions presented in the volume.

(1) The volume provides the reader with different perspectives on how one should understand the symbolic forms and their mutual relations in Cassirer's system. Pollok introduces Cassirer's Idealism as an "intention"-based stance "towards reality," expressed in "relational functions" (p. 16). This grounds the complementary thesis, which says that "all symbolic forms stand in a systematic, non-exclusive relationship with one another" (p. 21). Tobias Endres argues that Cassirer's philosophy is meant to provide a complete system of symbolic forms. More specifically, Endres claims that the "three symbolic functions (expressive, presentative, purely significative)" are presented in their symbolic formations "(mimetic, analogical, symbolic)" (p. 124). In contrast or complementary to Pollok's perspectivism, Endres explains this by the hidden "theory of representation" he identifies in Cassirer's account that forms "the material inventory of our world" (p. 127). Pierre Keller also emphasizes the relational feature of the symbolic forms. Keller suggests understanding Cassirer's system as

a “*dynamic* temporal-historical and social structuralist” account that resonates with the structuralist tradition in the twentieth century (p. 43). We find a similar emphasis in Valerio Marconi’s contribution, where a line is drawn between Cassirer and current Danish structuralists. Marconi argues that “the pragmatic meaning of Cassirer’s philosophy of language is a synthesis of structuralist and cognitivist standpoints” (p. 280). Although these observations have fundamentally different backgrounds, these contributions bring to the fore that current Cassirer scholars widely agree on Cassirer’s commitment to a relational or structuralist thesis that treats symbolic forms in their dynamic formations and manifestations.

(2) We find less consent regarding the question of the tradition in which Cassirer spells out his notion of idealism and normativity. Various scholars argue that the underlying unity accompanying Cassirer’s philosophy and his understanding of the teleological self-liberation process through history, which is only to be detected in hindsight, involves a “Hegelian” moment (Pollok, Keller). Other scholars, however, emphasize the Kantian aspects of Cassirer’s philosophy. Fabien Capeilleres identifies two systematic grounds from where Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms unfolds: a “critical” and a “normative” philosophy (p. 91). Capeilleres traces Cassirer’s critical philosophy back to the transcendental method as it was developed in the Marburg School (Hermann Cohen). Only so we may uncover the functional laws in the symbolic forms. Similarly, Massimo Ferrari suggests that the late Cassirer would provide textual evidence for the view that Cassirer’s program was to be depicted in the sphere of Kantian transcendentalism as it asks for the “necessity in experience” (p. 112). This “‘liberal’ version of Marburg philosophy of culture” includes, according to Ferrari, all symbolic expressions “without corroborating the picture of Cassirer as a purported ‘Hegelian’” (p. 111). Stephen Lofts notes that Cassirer’s philosophy would show Kantian and Hegelian moments. However, he argues that Cassirer’s “ontological pluralism” and his devotion to “ethical freedom” would finally come closer to Kant than to Hegel (p. 159). Lofts even suggests that the pluralistic creative energies would evolve in a Kantian notion of “open cosmopolitanism,” which he interprets as “a non-Marxist” version of “socialism” (p. 165). Michael Gregory also emphasizes the Kantian ethical idea in Cassirer by arguing for a “normative space [...] that makes room for the free act of the cultural agent for which she is responsible” (p. 168). Gregory Moss, in contrast, claims that Cassirer’s cultural forms are, to some extent, embedded in Schelling’s philosophy of nature, thereby emphasizing that “autonomy is a necessary condition for explicating philosophical problems central to the task of developing a transcendental philosophy of culture” (p. 193). Lydia Patton provides another novel view on the issue, showing crucial parallels between Cassirer and the more direct

predecessors from the nineteenth century. Patton's contribution allows us to make sense of Cassirer's logic liberated from the Kantian language and to analyze his philosophy "in terms of the applied logic of *Erkenntnistheorie*" we know from the *völkerpsychological* tradition (p. 263).

The occurring tensions are, to some extent, resolvable due to the fact that scholars put different weights on various aspects. This, however, does not remove the systematic frictions caused by those interpretations. How can the *animal symbolicum* be understood as part of a self-liberation process of which we can only make sense of in hindsight and yet take the agents accountable for their choices? And how can Cassirer hold onto the transcendental and *völkerpsychological* methods that, if thoroughly thought through, exclude one another? While the articles addressing these issues provide convincing arguments of how to understand the problem of agency and logic in Cassirer's system, the question of the influence of his predecessors and how to understand Cassirer's view on idealism, normativity, and logic lead to questions that are yet to be solved.

A third significant emphasis lies on Cassirer's increased focus on language, which is discussed in two regards: as a symbolic form and as a meta-reflection on Cassirer's own historiographical method. Martina Plümacher argues that to understand Cassirer's method, one would need to understand the *technological* function of our symbolic language, which is to "increase efficacy." Against this background, she focuses on Cassirer's religious and political writing, suggesting that these fields encompass the genesis of secular moral thinking out of the symbolic form of religion (pp. 245–250). Olga Knizhnik takes on a meta-perspective by questioning how Cassirer (who refrains from formal arguments) uses language in his philosophy of symbolic forms. By analyzing Cassirer's historiographical method, she argues that "productive imagination" and "artistic intuition" are two key features characterizing Cassirer's approach (p. 216).

Knizhnik's meta-reflection inspires to test Cassirer's methodology against himself. The Cassirerian method assumes that we can only make sense of our culture and thus of ourselves if we look at the symbolic expressions constituting our cultural history. Over a century after Cassirer, one thus could ask if or to what extent Cassirer's philosophy has likewise to be taken as a historical expression, seeking to be actualized. What would Cassirer's methodology look like if we tried to apply it to contemporary issues of the twenty-first century? Could 'Cassirer's method,' which is indebted to German Idealism, neo-Kantianism, and *Völkerpsychologie* be understood as a cultural expression in the course of our self-liberation process? And if so, what were the philosophical consequences of such actualization?

Despite the richness and the wide variety of approaches, questions, and interpretative suggestions that skilled and knowledgeable Cassirer scholars put

forward, it is unfortunate that the contributions do not engage more with one another. I have briefly sketched the tensions that evolve in (2) and posed some questions following from (3), showing that further scholarly engagement with the philosophical commitments in Cassirer's complex system is desired. This being said, the volume proves to be an invaluable source that gives an excellent overview as well as deep insights into the most crucial debates in current Cassirer scholarship. The well-researched papers lay the cornerstone for future contributions that aim to pick up on the tensions that appear in Cassirer's philosophy of culture.

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