ANIMAL SYMBOLICUM AND HOMO INTERROGANS. CASSIRER’S PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE BETWEEN NEOKANTIANISM AND DISCURSIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

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In the last two decades the work of Ernst Cassirer has been met with increasing interest among scholars from various disciplines. Not only philosophers, but also linguists, historians, ethnologists, theologians and sociologists have contributed to what has been coined as the “renaissance” of Cassirer (Ferrari 1994 and 2003). In times when science in general and philosophy in particular are departmentalized into a vast multitude of disciplines, branches, schools and traditions, Cassirer’s work undoubtedly deserves admiration for its comprehensiveness and systematic courage. Among his books are contributions to the philosophy of mathematics, Einstein’s theory of relativity, the genealogy of modern thinking in renaissance and enlightenment, epistemology, and the mythical essence of the modern State, as well as to pedagogy and politics. It seems as if Cassirer was one of the last intellectual giants able to encompass the scientific exploration of the world in its total complexity. There is no recent approach which comes close to Cassirer’s universal mind.

Cassirer’s historical works, do not only provide a comprehensive presentation of the genesis of modern Western scientific civilization, culminating in his encyclopedic four volume book *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Neuzeit*. His ambitions even aim at nothing less than a systematic reconstruction of human culture as such, which he put forth most prominently in his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923–29). In this major work he presents a revision of Kant’s transcendental project towards a “Prolegomena for a future philosophy of culture.” It intends to investigate the structural laws of the genealogy of human achievements in various cultural areas and institutions and explores the conditions of possibility of the formative power of the human mind. This philosophical agenda is built upon an impressive insight into numerous fields of scientific research within the humanities. The *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* thus contains material for scholars from almost every branch of the humanities and arts. Here one finds a philo-
sophical approach aiming to understand the genesis of culture in close contact with concrete departmental research within the humanities, something which philosophers all too often, as the rumor goes, tend to ignore.

The current interest in Cassirer could itself be taken as a phenomenon worth investigating, as this interest within the humanities and the philosophy of sciences surely reflects the demand for a broader perspective among those scholars who feel caged within the ideological narrowness of formerly predominant theoretic paradigms or schools, i.e. (post-)structuralism, (social) constructivism, Marxism or deconstructivism. The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms is widely seen to meet this demand, by offering an open-minded and unpretentious yet powerful and encompassing theory towards an understanding of the dynamic logic of human culture.

It is important to emphasize the genuine philosophical motive in Cassirer's approach. It intends to understand the unity of its object, namely culture, in its various manifestations. We are, after all, living in the same world, despite its many facets. However, although I acknowledge Cassirer's merits in asking for a philosophy of culture, I do think there is a tension in the overall theoretical approach. This tension can tentatively be identified as a conflict between a Neo-Kantian agenda on the one hand and Cassirer's interest inherent in his philosophy of culture on the other. That is to say, despite Cassirer's increasing distance to the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism, he still seems to be captured in some of its decisive suppositions in the overall aim of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. The programmatic passages of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms make it clear that its author is mainly concerned with epistemological questions with regard to a foundation of scientific objectivity, including arts and humanities. Cassirer abandons the systematic orientation towards a philosophical foundation of science and arts in his An Essay on Man (1944) in favor of an anthropological point of view. The philosophy of culture and its most important conceptual contribution, the theory of symbolic mediation, allows a redirecting of Cassirer's epistemological question towards the essence of human beings as such. This anthropological perspective is also at stake in some minor pieces, in which Cassirer explains certain motives or arguments for his general approach. Along the lines of this tendency, I want to dwell on the motive of questioning, as it opens up for what one might label as discursive anthropology. Following this motive one might argue that symbolic formation is not only a way of expressing or establishing the relation between an individual and his or her environment. It also provides the acquisition of and the entrance