

Socratic Self-Knowledge and the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

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Philosophical idealism since Hegel has had the problem of whether it can produce an ethics. The philosophy of the idea has a propensity to allow thought to withdraw into its own inner form, to develop an account of experience solely in terms of dialectical distinctions and categories. The result is a metaphysical logic that offers a single system of the real in which the object is brought together with the subject. When this approach is extended to ethics the result is a comprehensive system of the existing forms of moral, social, and political life, but no vision of the good or the best is forthcoming from philosophy itself. The owl of Minerva, as Hegel says, flies only at the falling of the dusk. Philosophy plays no role in the making of the day.

THE ORIGINS OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF SYMBOLIC FORMS

Cassirer inherits this problem of philosophical idealism, of the idea bending back upon itself as its own circle, attached to the world only in principle and without any influence on human practice.¹ His first solution is to return to the critical idealism of Kant, but to go further than the Marburg Neo-Kantian preoccupation with science and cognition. Cassirer perceived Kant as laying the groundwork for a philosophy of human culture once it is understood that the task of critical philosophy is to uncover the forms of human experience. The problem of knowledge is the problem of the forms of knowledge. In the first *Critique*, Kant shows the form of theoretical thought, in the second

Critique, ethical life, and in the third *Critique*, the organic and the aesthetic. Cassirer extends Kantian criticism to myth, religion, language, art, and contemporary science. He also mentions forms of custom (*Sitte*), law (*Recht*), economics (*Wirtschaft*), and technology (*Technik*). Thus, Cassirer says, the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture.

The factor that ties all of these kinds of form together is the symbol. The symbol occurs when something in sense perception takes on universal meaning. Cassirer finds in the phenomenon of the symbol an actualization of “sense” in the “sensible” (*Sinn im Sinnlichkeit*) that is at the basis of the Kantian conception of the “schematism.” All forms of knowledge are embodied in basic forms of cultural life, and these are made possible by the power of the symbolic act to grasp meaning in the sensible. Seen in this way, Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms is a new philosophy of idealism that differs from Hegel’s idealism in three fundamental ways.

(1) Cassirer says that Hegel’s phenomenology of spirit begins too high in experience, at the level of the thing. He purports with his analysis of myth to take Hegel’s ladder one step lower, to the level of the expressive function of consciousness, in which the world is first felt as an interaction of malignant and benign forces. (2) Through his doctrine of the symbol, Cassirer can resist the tendency to move from the phenomena of spirit (*Geist*) to the idea, in which philosophy becomes a pure process of thought, as he claims occurs in Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, in which the individual forms of experience become absorbed in one form, that of metaphysical logic. (3) Cassirer does away with Hegel’s principle of the Absolute. He sees the Absolute as forcing all the forms of experience into a single system, in which one form is *aufgehoben* into the next, often overriding the confrontations and oppositional gaps that lie within actual cultural development. Cassirer wishes to replace Hegel’s dialectic of *Aufhebung* with his dialectic of function, in which, at any point in cultural life, philosophy can give a systematic account of the interrelations of the various symbolic forms without reducing them to an overall logic. Cassirer replaces the idea of system with the idea of “systematic review” (*systematischer Überblick*).

What Cassirer takes from Hegel is that the forms of spirit are a totality and that the relations between them are dialectical. Cassirer says he agrees with Hegel that the “true is the whole.” His conception

of “review” or *Überblick* is that these relations are best articulated by passing back and forth among the forms of culture and showing how each specifically functions in relation to the others. Cassirer endorses Hegel’s developmental conception of phenomenology over and against purely descriptive phenomenology. He wishes to show how all human knowledge, as well as each of its forms, develops from a basis in mythical expression to a stage of representational thought and finally to a stage of purely significative thought, in which symbols generate meanings through other systems of symbols.

In order for the critique of reason to become the critique of culture, Cassirer follows in his own thought the course that philosophical idealism took in the history of modern philosophy from Kant to Hegel. In so doing, Cassirer develops an idealism that is neither truly Kantian nor Hegelian. In his intellectual odyssey he sails between the Scylla of Kant and the Charybdis of Hegel. To maintain his course he obtains help from many figures, such as Vico, Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Heinrich Hertz, Theodor Vischer, but most notably from Goethe, to whose thought he turns for many crucial starting points, including his concept of “basis phenomena” (*Basisphänomene*).

Cassirer sees that the Hegelian synthesis depends upon the philosophy of spirit. The central concept of Hegel is *Geist*, which leads to the system, the “idea” of the *Logic*. The reaction to this is philosophy of life, *Lebensphilosophie*. Cassirer expands the conception of the philosophy of life beyond the particular movement by that name in German philosophy. Cassirer’s expanded concept of the philosophy of life includes the works of Klages, Simmel, Scheler, Bergson, and Heidegger. Life philosophy attempts to solve the problems of the tendency to the idea in the philosophy of spirit by calling attention to the reality of the immediacy of life. Unity lies not in the forms of spirit but in the immediate existence of life.

Cassirer divides the whole of late nineteenth and twentieth-century philosophy into philosophies of spirit and philosophies of life. It is this metaphysical opposition between spirit and life that Cassirer thinks the philosophy of symbolic forms can overcome. For this solution Cassirer turns to Hegel. He sees Hegel as understanding that spirit is a transformation of life. Life takes on the life of form. Life in its immediacy continues to challenge spirit, and spirit must formulate a continual response to it. The solution Cassirer ultimately advances to the interconnection of life and spirit is his conception of basis phenomena.

Cassirer is brought to the problem of spirit and life not out of purely theoretical concerns but out of essentially normative concerns. Cassirer comes to these problems because of the times. He understood from the beginning that there is a normative dimension to human culture, that the problem of form is connected to the ideal of freedom. His response to World War I was his book *Freiheit und Form* (Freedom and form), which is an interpretation of German aesthetics and cultural history.² Form releases the human spirit from the bonds it is held in through the immediacy of sense. This freedom takes place through the power of art to form our senses and sensibilities. The theme of the power of the symbol to pass beyond the immediate into the mediation of cultural activity runs through Cassirer's treatment of myth, language, and science in the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.³ But this freedom from the immediate is treated in this work in epistemic terms, not in terms of ethical or cultural ideals. This normative dimension of the problem occurs for Cassirer because of World War II and his departure from Nazi Germany in 1933.

Cassirer announces this concern for normative philosophy in his address on assuming his professorship at the University of Göteborg in 1935, in which he discusses the sense in which the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical problem.⁴ From this point on, the philosophy of symbolic forms becomes something normative for Cassirer. It becomes something more than resolving the problems of philosophical idealism as left in the tension between Kant and Hegel. How does Cassirer accomplish this new turn in his philosophy?

I wish to suggest that he does this by employing Goethe's conception of immediacy and the human to recover a version of Socratic philosophy. In the last decade of his life Cassirer comes to see his philosophy of symbolic forms as a form of Socratic thought that lets him surmount the problems of the distance philosophical idealism has from the world and from human action in the world. The crucial turning-points in this process are his views in his 1935 lecture, his conception of the metaphysics of symbolic forms (c. 1940), and his *An Essay on Man* (1944).⁵ In his chapter on Hegel in his last work, *The Myth of the State* (1946), which appeared after his death, what concerns Cassirer greatly is the sense in which Hegel's dictum that philosophies are their own times apprehended in thoughts contains a conception of philosophy that promotes only a passive role in relation

of the world.⁶ It is a role, Cassirer points out, that is not followed by Hegel in his specific political writings, which directly concern constitutional criticism and reforms.

It is not my claim that Cassirer ever abandons the connections of his philosophy with the problems of Kantian or Hegelian idealism or its roots in his interpretation of Descartes and Leibniz and the background of modern philosophy. My aim is to suggest how Cassirer reconceives his philosophy in the last decade of his life and what the implications of this are for any philosophical conception of culture.

PHILOSOPHY'S RELATION TO THE WORLD

Cassirer's inaugural lecture on assuming his professorship at the University of Göteborg, "The Concept of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem," is based on a quotation from Goethe's *Materialien zur Geschichte der Farbenlehre* (*Materials on the History of the Doctrine of Colors*) concerning the difference between Plato and Aristotle. From this he moves to Kant's distinction between a scholastic and a worldly concept of philosophy, and finally he connects this to Schweitzer's concept of the duty philosophy has to society.

Plato, Goethe says: "relates himself to the world as a blessed spirit, whom it pleases sometimes to stay for a while in the world; he is not so much concerned to come to know the world, because he already presupposes it, as to communicate to it in a friendly way what he brings along with him and what it needs" (*SMC*, 50–51). Plato investigates the world only in order to see beyond it, to rise in his thinking to its heights in order to return to its origin. Aristotle, Goethe says, on the contrary: "stands to the world as a man, an architect. He is only here once and must here make and create. He inquires about the earth, but not farther than to find a ground. . . . He draws a huge circumference for his building, procures materials from all sides, arranges them, piles them up, and climbs thus in regular form, pyramid fashion to the top" (*SMC*, 51). Aristotle is of the world, inquiring into it on its own terms, reconstructing it as a hierarchical ordering of its forms. Cassirer says that these two opposed tendencies run throughout the development of philosophical thought. "Both of the souls," Cassirer says, "abide in almost all great thinkers" (*SMC*, 51–52). They are the two sides of Faust—one that clings to what is here in the world and the other that struggles to transcend the world with a sublime vision.

Cassirer claims a significant moment in the history of philosophy, in which these two opposed powers are placed in balance, is the Kantian critical philosophy. Kant takes up the Platonic tendency toward form and redirects it, from its flight to a supersensible world, to an elucidation of the principles of the empirical world of experience, which are themselves not empirical but a priori. Like Aristotle, Cassirer says, Kant “stands firmly on the well-grounded earth, on the certain ground of science, but at the same time he wishes to lay bare the last supporting layer on which this foundation of the edifice of science rests” (*SMC*, 53). Cassirer says that the position of critical philosophy is decisive for him, but from this standpoint philosophy must raise the problem of the whole. He says, “Philosophy cannot be satisfied to ask about the form and structure of particular cultural regions, about the structure of language, art, law, myth, and religion. The deeper it penetrates into this structure the more clear and the more urgent becomes the problem of the whole for it. [Philosophy must ask:] What is this whole of spiritual culture? What is its end, its goal, its meaning?” (*SMC*, 57).

Cassirer says whenever this question of the whole is asked, philosophy can face it only through self-reflection. The question of the whole, which is essentially a Hegelian question, leads directly to the normative role of philosophy. To determine the meaning of culture is to advance a view of its goal and to suggest action in relation to its goal. In this way philosophy becomes involved in the world as a result of pursuing its own form of inquiry which is a comprehension of the whole of culture, the whole of the activity of the human spirit.

Cassirer calls attention to the twofold conception of philosophy stated in “The Architectonic of Pure Reason” in the first *Critique*. Kant speaks of the “scholastic conception” of philosophy. This is the pursuit of philosophy of its own ends—the logical perfection of knowledge, the lawful arrangement of principles, of proofs, and of the systematic unity of knowledge. This scholastic conception of philosophy cannot be dispensed with. This conception is essential for the dedication to reason that characterizes the philosopher. In addition to this scholastic conception of philosophy there is, Kant says, another conception of philosophy, a *conceptus cosmicus*. Kant says “On this view, philosophy is the science of the relation of all knowledge to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*), and the philosopher is not an artificer in the field of reason, but himself the lawgiver of

human reason” (*SMC*, 58–59). Cassirer says we have left this ideal behind in the development of modern philosophy, and he asks whether it is an ideal simply tied to the eighteenth-century doctrine of enlightenment or whether it is a part of philosophy itself when it conceives of the ideal of the philosopher.

Cassirer turns for an answer to Albert Schweitzer, whom he calls “one of the true cultural philosophers of our time.”⁷ Schweitzer’s view is expressed in his lectures delivered at the University of Uppsala in 1922, between the two world wars. Schweitzer reproaches contemporary philosophy for not seeing the crumbling of the ethical ideals of culture and warning us. Cassirer says he does not absolve himself from an attachment to the scholastic pursuit of philosophy. Indeed, this lecture is a definite turning-point in Cassirer’s concern with the normative possibilities of the philosophy of symbolic forms, a turn from it being simply a theory of knowledge to being a philosophical ideal. Schweitzer says that philosophy is not to be blamed for the crisis of modern culture. Philosophy did not cause the disintegration of ethical ideals, but it failed in its duty to warn us. He says, “in the hour of peril the watchman slept, who should have kept watch over us. So it happened that we did not struggle for our culture” (*SMC*, 60).

At the end of his inaugural lecture Cassirer criticizes Hegel for the unjustified optimism of the dictum “What is rational is real; what is real is rational.” He says reason is never a mere present, something simply actual. Reason must be actualized. It is not a given but a task. Cassirer says this view of reason as task holds in not only the theoretical sphere but also in the practical sphere. Culture is made by us as a struggle for the form of our own humanity. Here in this view Cassirer foreshadows his view of culture as self-knowledge and as tied to the basis phenomenon of the work (*das Werk*) in his metaphysics.

In his lecture to the Warburg Institute in London a year later, in 1936, “Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture,” Cassirer carries this point further. He says that the universal theme of the philosophy of culture and of idealism as connected to it is freedom. Cassirer says, “This aim is a moral one: and it is, therefore, in morality, it is in the system of ethics that we have to seek the true principles of a philosophy of history and a philosophy of civilization” (*SMC*, 85). Freedom, Cassirer says, is tied to the autonomy of reason and this is the universal aim of a philosophy of culture. He says that

Hegel and Kant agree on the importance of reason's relation to human freedom.

Hegel's philosophy involves an attack on Kant's idealism but, Cassirer says, there is one point on which Kant and Hegel perfectly agree. He says: "Like Kant he is convinced that the problem of freedom is the beginning and the end of idealistic philosophy. This problem pervades the whole work of Hegel" (*SMC*, 88). Cassirer says that the unity of culture is both an idea and an ideal, both of which must be understood dynamically. Both Hegel and Kant hold that the "process of culture is the progress of the consciousness of freedom" (*SMC*, 90). The attempt to make this principle of freedom known, to recover it from the basis of idealism, is Cassirer's version of the philosophical watchman. But he is always conscious that the power of the call to awake is tied to the ability of philosophy to maintain its "scholastic" stance. Ethical ideals that are not underpinned by a valid concept of knowledge and human reality will lose their ability to convince.

THE METAPHYSICS OF BASIS PHENOMENA

To accomplish the view that reason is the self-renewing work of spirit and that the essence of history is freedom, Cassirer needs a philosophy of life that will allow him to preserve the immediacy of life yet allow spirit (*Geist*) to arise naturally from life (*Leben*). A doctrine of freedom must be attached not simply to the flow of life but to the forms of culture as they arise in spirit. The idea or form must be grounded in what is not the idea as such; it must be grounded in what is primary in human experience.

To discover what is primary, Cassirer turns to Goethe. In his *Maxims* 391–93, Goethe declares three phenomena to be basic to human experience. The first is life, which he describes as "the rotating movement of the monad about itself." He says that the impulse to nurture this life is implanted in every individual, but what it is in itself is a mystery. The second phenomenon is "the living-moving monad's intervention into the surroundings of the outer world." The individual being is aware of itself as having no internal limits but as encountering external limits. We can be clear to ourselves about what we experience in the movement of life, but this internality is a mystery to others. We are for them, and they are for us, externals. The

third phenomenon is “what we direct toward the outer world as actions and deed, as speech and writing.”⁸ These are the productions made from our inner world that acquire an independent status beyond ourselves. The outer world can come to have an understanding of these productions that is beyond what we ourselves are able to have. Since an action or thought produced from inner reality endures, others may find in it more significance than its creator intended or was aware.

Human life is always, in some sense, conscious of itself; it always “knows itself.” Goethe understands these three phenomena as three levels of development. Life as the reality of the monadic being is constant movement. It is the “stream of consciousness” that knows no rest. It is not a “mysterium” in the sense of something completely unknown because it is always revealing itself. It is primary because there is no “explanation” of it as such.

The second level is “becoming aware,” which is at the basis of doing, of acting and reacting to surroundings. Life does not remain enclosed within its own circle. It comes forth to the outside and manifests and verifies its existence. This movement of life from the monad to what is external is the basis of the social world and ethical life. There is no reason for this, no causal explanation, because any such understanding is based on the fact of this as a basic phenomenon of the movement of life of the individual. The individual is an abstraction; there is no individual apart from the world it is in. We only recognize ourselves in others.

The third level answers the question of how others know us. They know us only by means of what we do and say, through what we create. “Others can know us only in our work, as what we do and make, as what we say and write, as *praxis* and *poiesis*” (*PSF*, 4:130). “Work” here is the German *Werk*, something made, a product that carries cultural, intellectual, or artistic meaning, not *Arbeit*, the ordinary labor of human existence. The transformation of our internal life into an enduring work that exists for others in an external order is alienating. The “I” of the inward life can no longer find itself and is inclined to move back into itself. These three levels form a circle of human experience upon which human culture is based. They are the metaphysical ground, phenomenologically derived, upon which Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms is based.

Goethe, Cassirer says, as an artist protests against any attempt to go behind these primary phenomena. As an artist he is concerned with the surface of the phenomena, and even as a thinker he refuses any attempt at their explanation. Cassirer says Goethe “rages against the ‘Procuress Understanding’” that would disrupt the immediacy of life. “The understanding is always at work to mediate this immediacy, but thereby depriving it of its true and original meaning by this alleged mediation” (*PSF*, 4:132). Cassirer claims that Goethe as an artist can hold to this attitude toward the understanding. Cassirer holds that these basis phenomena can have no further philosophical justification, but that it is not possible to eliminate the powers of the understanding as part of our general intellectual life.

On Cassirer’s view there is a dialectical relationship between life and spirit as opposite dimensions of the real. Life completes its activity by transforming itself into spirit. Spirit takes up the movement of life into its own activity of the formation of experience. Cassirer emphasizes that life and spirit are not two substances but are functions that interact with each other and mutually determine each other. Life is constantly involved with the mediation of spirit, and spirit is constantly renewing its activity of cultural formation by confrontation with the immediacy of life. Cassirer regards this general metaphysical process as occurring in parallel fashion within the basis phenomena of human existence. The stream of consciousness of life within the “I” mediates itself through action and the will in confrontation with the Other. Beyond the oppositions of social life is the moment of self-reflection from which the work is generated.

In this way Cassirer places the understanding as the manifestation of self-reflection within the dialectic of life and spirit. Self-reflection is rooted, for Cassirer, in the understanding’s function of questioning, which is one of the original and vital functions of the mind. The mind truly becomes itself through its power to formulate the question. Cassirer says: “This function stands at the beginning of all philosophy (not only at the beginning of so-called metaphysics)—wonder as the beginning of philosophy. It begins with the question of ‘what is’” (*PSF*, 4:133). Once the question has been formed it is the onset of reflection, which Cassirer sees as the genius of Socrates. Socrates, he says, directs the question from “what is” toward moral self-consciousness: he asks about the “what for,” about the *eidōs* as *telos*. “The transfiguration of ‘life’ through the

form of the ‘question’: that is the specifically Socratic achievement” (*PSF*, 4:133).

The device of the question allows Cassirer to formulate an original basis for Kant’s conception of reason as related to human aims—reason as lawgiver. Cassirer sees Socrates as providing, in the ethical question, the device that takes us out of theory. The question bridges the gap between the “what is” and the “what for.” The question becomes the key to understanding self-reflection as the essential act of human freedom.

The question takes us out of both the stream of consciousness of life of the “I” and the actions in our response to the Other because the reflective question is an act of self-determination. It removes us from the immediate by objectifying the immediate and thus creating distance between the I and the immediate. The immediate is not just acted on. It can be held at a distance by the mind.

This sense of freedom is both Kantian and Hegelian, but Cassirer finds its roots in Socratic philosophy—the original form of the philosophy of the idea. Life and thought stand in a dialectical relationship to each other and thought stands in a dialectical relationship to itself—to its own productions. The question that arises in the philosophical passion of wonder has a counterpart in the answer that is sought and toward which the question directs its attention. But any answer, in Socratic fashion, is only a new standpoint of thought to which the question may be applied. The movement that is inherent in the stream of consciousness is transformed into the movement thought produces within itself—the movement of the idea. In this movement thought attempts to produce its own nature as an object for itself. But the source of its own movement is not simply itself as thought: the constant movement of life within the I is always outstripping the form given it by thought. This movement of life within the I is what moves thought forward. Thought gains direction by its self-reflection on its role with the Other. In this way the *eidōs* connects to *telos*.

THE SOCRACTIC CONCEPT OF THE WORK

The final embodiment of the freedom of human reason as lawgiver is the work (*das Werk*). The work is the basis of human culture and the basis of philosophy, whose task is to be the watchman of the ideal of freedom. Philosophy’s theoretical task, that underlies its

role as custodian of the *telos* of freedom, is the comprehension of culture as a synthesis of the diversity of symbolic forms, its grasp of the inner form of the human spirit.

Cassirer characterizes theories of knowledge in terms of the three basis phenomena. He regards Bergson, Descartes, and Husserl as examples of the first basis phenomenon of the I or the monad. He says, “they are all directed toward the same point (the pure ‘intuition’ of the I), but they attain it in completely different ways” (*PSF*, 4:172). Cassirer’s aim is a philosophy of self-knowledge and he rejects the view that either introspection or pure intuition of the I can produce an adequate form of self-knowledge.

Cassirer says that the clearest example of a philosopher of the second basis phenomenon is Fichte. We must see beyond the traditional interpretation of Fichte’s philosophy as a doctrine of the pure ego. Fichte takes neither Descartes’ nor Husserl’s *cogito* as a starting-point, instead he takes Kant’s doctrine of “transcendental apperception.” He shifts this doctrine from a logical to an ethical form, from the intellect to the will. The “I” for Fichte cannot be “shown” phenomenologically as a static entity. It can only be demonstrated through a *Tathandlung*. Cassirer says for Fichte “the I finds neither itself nor the ‘world’ receptively as a simple datum. It ‘posits’ the world and posits itself in an originary, spontaneous act” (*PSF*, 4:181–82). The I can be explained only in terms of an original drive to action per se, a drive not toward any object or goal but to action in general. The I on Fichte’s view cannot be explained theoretically; it can be explained only practically, that is, in terms of a moral compulsion through which the Other and the world force themselves upon us.

Socrates is the central example of the philosophical standpoint of the third basis phenomenon of the work. When we move from the sphere of intuition, to the sphere of action, to that of contemplation, we naturally move to Socratic philosophy. “In the history of philosophy it is Socrates who discovers this sphere, who puts it forth and establishes it as a central object for philosophical investigation and ‘marvel’” (*PSF*, 4:184). Socrates contains, in his own figure as a philosopher, the two sides of philosophy—the basic opposition between theory and practice. Regarded in one way, especially as he is portrayed by Plato, Socrates is the artist of reason, the master of conceptual analysis, the discoverer of the logos.

Regarded in another way, as he is portrayed by Xenophon, Socrates is the moralist, the advocate of practical wisdom, although Plato also shows this side of Socrates. Cassirer says Socrates defies every attempt to “pin him down.” This paradoxical status of Socrates’ character is the basis of Socratic irony. Socrates not only employs irony as a type of philosophical thought but is himself an ironic figure, passing back and forth between these two positions. He is an ironic figure in the sense that irony as a trope is used to mean the opposite of what is literally said. Thus when Socrates makes a theoretical assertion it often implies not just what is said but a practical meaning, and the reverse.

Socrates bases his philosophy of contemplation on the dictum of the Delphic oracle: Know thyself. Cassirer says: “He does not call for ‘self-knowledge’ in the sense of some pure (monadic) looking inward (intro-spection, intuition of the I in the pure act of the *cogito*); instead, it means something completely new and unique for him. This call now means: know your *work* and know ‘yourself’ *in* your work; know what you do, so you can know what you know” (*PSF*, 4:185–86). Cassirer points out that Socratic questioning starts not from a theoretical issue but from something occurring in the world of action. Socrates begins his questioning from something done by craftsmen, from a common view, or from a given human action. He proceeds from this toward a theoretical understanding of the elements involved.

Philosophical self-knowledge originates in the movement undertaken between the practical and the theoretical. Philosophy as grounded in the work has as its aim self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is the work that is made in dialogic speech. This form of contemplation takes the self out of itself because what is made in this activity has an “objectivity” that endures and is open to examination by others. Cassirer says that, unlike Platonic philosophy, the philosophy of symbolic forms does not take such speech in the direction of a pure realm of forms. Instead the philosophy of symbolic forms does not separate form from the work of culture. The work of philosophy is the illumination of the harmony in the diversity of culture.

In *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, Cassirer describes Vico in terms that place him along with Socrates as a philosopher of the third basis phenomenon. Where thought must choose between piecemeal knowledge of nature or piecemeal knowledge of subjective concepts, Cassirer claims Vico turns to the notion of works to satisfy

both conditions. Cassirer says: “The works of human *culture* are the only ones that unite in themselves both conditions in which perfect knowledge is based; they have not only a conceptually apprehended existence but also a thoroughly determined, individual and historic one. However, the internal structure of this existence is accessible and open to the human spirit only because it is its creator.”⁹ Knowledge of works is the goal of philosophy for Vico because knowledge of works is identical to self-knowledge. This view of self-knowledge links Vico to Socrates. “According to Vico, the real goal of our knowledge is not the knowledge of nature but human self-knowledge.”¹⁰

Cassirer’s turn to Socrates as the prime example of the third basis phenomenon allows him to look back on critical idealism and absolute idealism from a third standpoint. His method is not Kantian critique as such, nor is it Hegelian system. Cassirer’s concept of “systematic review,” which he mentions several times in various formulations but does not explain, is a version of Socratic questioning.¹¹ Systematic review is critical in the sense that it applies the question to what already exists in human culture. In this sense it is a “review,” an “overview” (*Überblick*). It is also dialectical in the sense that its aim is to elicit the coherence of spirit to which the particular subject of its investigation is connected.

To accomplish this mode of philosophical thought, Cassirer requires an Archimedean point on which to stand that is neither transcendental nor absolute. It is not transcendental because Cassirer’s intention is to grasp the inner form of the part of culture that is under question, not simply to state the conditions of its possibility from a point of view outside it. It is not absolute because, although Cassirer holds the true to be the whole, he is never actually at the point of the whole. Systematic review is a form of idealism that locates the act of philosophizing *in medias res*. Begin at any point in human experience and the philosophy of symbolic forms can connect to any other point through its perspective of the whole and say how, in specific terms, it falls within the logic or “tonality” of certain symbolic forms. This is a Socratic way of proceeding. The *agora* in Cassirer’s case is the universality of cultural life, governed by the distinctively human power of the symbol.

For Cassirer, this ability to speak about culture is the key to human freedom because it allows us to think beyond the present moment—the immediacy that life produces or the action in which

the will is presently engaged. The idea gives us access to the ideal and the ideal frees us from the immediate. Cassirer's standpoint is Socratic but less agile than that of Socrates. Socrates seems to move with ease between the theoretical and the practical, thinking easily within the *agora*, pushing those with whom he speaks toward the full-blooded sense of ideas. Cassirer is always the Olympian, struggling to escape the theoretical, to put forth its normative dimension, never fully able to let his philosophy move away from its scholarly basis. Cassirer comes closest to such moments in his later works, especially in his metaphysics of symbolic forms. Despite these constrictions, the decency of Cassirer's spirit, his insistence on the civility of culture, on the human as able to make the human ideal, produces philosophical morale in the face of the fragmentation of modern life and its philosophies of alienation and existence.

HUMAN CULTURE AS SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Cassirer begins *An Essay on Man* with the sentence: "That self-knowledge is the highest aim of philosophical inquiry appears to be generally acknowledged." He says that even the skeptic endorses the aim of self-knowledge: "We must try to break the chain connecting us with the outer world in order to enjoy our true freedom. 'La plus grande chose du monde c'est de scavoir être à soy,' writes Montaigne" (*EM*, 1). *An Essay on Man* is Cassirer's reflection on his Kantian-Hegelian-based statement of his philosophy of symbolic forms as it originally appeared in the 1920s. In *An Essay on Man* he announces the Socratic intent of his philosophy of culture and its connection with the question of human freedom.

Cassirer does not intend to replace his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* with this new work; in fact, in *An Essay on Man* he refers the reader back to the earlier work for a closer discussion and analysis of the technical problems involved. In this new work he is putting the old themes in a new light. The Socratic sense of his conception of symbolic forms is meant to add a new dimension to its sources in Kant and Hegel, not to replace these sources.

Cassirer takes his title from Alexander Pope's philosophical poem of 1732–34. What is Cassirer's intention in employing this title? He gives no specific explanation of it. Pope's poem has as its purpose to vindicate the ways of God to man and to prove that the order of the

world is the best of all possible orders, that despite the appearance of evil there is a perfection of the whole that our limited vision often fails to see. This seems like Voltaire's satire on Leibniz's metaphysics, and indeed, Samuel Johnson said that Pope's attempt to show that "whatever is right, is right" reminds us of Pangloss's views in *Candide*. This is not Cassirer's purpose in his *Essay*. Cassirer's aim is probably to point to Pope's dictum that the "proper study of mankind is man" and to remind us that the Enlightenment contains a resolute humanism that is still valuable.¹² In his *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* Cassirer says that this work, together with *The Platonic Renaissance in England* and *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, constitute a "phenomenology of the philosophic spirit."¹³ This phenomenology shows that human beings are the makers of the human world of culture.

Cassirer's critique of modernity rests on the breakdown of a common context that can support the quest for self-knowledge. The "crisis in man's knowledge of himself," as Cassirer calls it, is based on the modern fragmentation of knowledge, which is also a fragmentation of the human self. What the human being is, is understood in terms of the primary intent of the field conducting investigation into the human. In such approaches, the human is reduced to any one of its aspects, to sexual instinct, economic drive, emotional reactions, class interests, or biological conditions. Cassirer says: "Theologians, scientists, politicians, sociologists, biologists, psychologists, ethnologists, economists all approached the problem from their own viewpoints. To combine or unify all these particular aspects and perspectives was impossible" (*EM*, 21).

At the basis of Cassirer's concern is the Socratic question: What is man? Cassirer says: "Only one question remains: What is man? Socrates always maintains and defends the ideal of an objective, absolute, universal truth. But the only universe he knows, and to which all his inquiries refer, is the universe of man. His philosophy—if he possesses a philosophy—is strictly anthropological" (*EM*, 4). He regards the "clue to the nature of man" to be the symbol. He defines man as *animal symbolicum*. Following the method of Socrates in the *Republic*, Cassirer sees the nature of the individual writ large in the forms of human culture. If Cassirer can show that all cultural activities are various ways of forming the world through the power of the symbol, the individual will encounter its own nature writ large in

culture. The human being will understand itself as an organism distinguished from other organisms by its unique power of symbolic formation. The symbol will provide the key to a functional account of human nature, one that allows the human being to understand itself through its work (*Werk*).

Cassirer sees this functional conception of human nature as an extension of the Socratic conception of man as a creature that is always in search of itself; such a creature is by its nature involved in the examination of its life. In Socrates Cassirer sees reason as connected to the human aim to be human. Cassirer says that for Socrates the human individual is that being who is capable of asking a rational question and giving a rational answer. He says: "Both his knowledge and his morality are comprehended in this circle. It is by this fundamental faculty, by this faculty of giving a response to himself and to others, that man becomes a 'responsible' being, a moral subject" (*EM*, 6).

Here Cassirer suggests a positive way to view the irony of the figure of Socrates that he describes in the *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*—that when we regard Socrates at one moment he is the theoretician and at another he appears as the moralist. Socrates, as said above, passes freely between these two approaches to the world by the medium of the question. The device of the question allows the individual to make reason functional. Reason becomes the basis for both our response to the world and defining our responsibility in it. It is through reason that we move between theoretical and moral inquiry, and the medium of this rationality is the power both to respond to the world and to act on it through the formation of symbols. Cassirer expresses his commitment to Socratic philosophy as: "The Socratic problem and the Socratic method can never be forgotten or obliterated" (*EM*, 6).

Although in Cassirer's account we obtain a new version of the Socratic approach to philosophy, we do not obtain a doctrine of the individual. Once Cassirer adopts the method of the *Republic* to approach the nature of the individual writ large, he, unlike the Platonic Socrates, does not return to the small letters of the individual and offer an account of the virtues. It is here that his attachment to Socrates and his Kantianism come into conflict. Cassirer speaks only of the power of reason to form human ideals set against the purely animal world of reactions. Unlike other animals, the human animal can respond to the world in terms of "ought" or the ideal, which is made possible because of the freedom from immediacy achieved by the power of symbolic formation.

At the end of *An Essay on Man*, having described the various forms of cultural life, Cassirer introduces two central ideas—harmony and self-liberation. The task of philosophy is to show the possibilities of a harmony of symbolic forms, which does not exist as such in cultural life, in which various forms struggle to dominate others. Philosophy can hold up to this the Heraclitean conception of “harmony in contrariety, as in the case of the bow and the lyre” (*EM*, 222–23; 228). This is a fulfillment of Schweitzer’s demand for the watchman. Because philosophy understands culture as a totality, philosophy can understand the imbalances in cultural life and pose the ideal of harmony against actual conflicts. Philosophy, which is not itself a symbolic form, as Cassirer says in one of the fragments related to his conception of the metaphysics of symbolic forms, has the ability and the duty to show theoretically the harmony in the contraries of the symbolic forms that make up culture.

Philosophy can also show the connection of culture to human freedom. Cassirer says: “Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man’s progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science, are various phases in this process. In all of them man discovers and proves a new power—the power to build up a world of his own, an ‘ideal’ world. Philosophy cannot give up its search for a fundamental unity in this ideal world” (*EM*, 228). This echoes what Cassirer finds in Kant and Hegel, that freedom is tied to the process of civilization. Self-knowledge allows the self to free itself from its own immediacy and in the distance from the immediate the basis for its freedom, its self-liberation, is formed. The self becomes the maker of itself and knows itself in its work. The self’s power to make its own being in its own distinctive activity of reason gives it a moral self, for it is responsible for its world, as it is the maker of it.

NOTES

1. My essay begins from Donald Phillip Verene’s “Kant, Hegel, and Cassirer: The Origins of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30 (1969): 33–46. In this article, Verene confirmed the hypotheses of a number of the contributors to the *Library of Living Philosophers* volume on Cassirer (*Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp [Evanston, Ill.: Library of Living Philosophers, 1949]), that Cassirer’s conception of symbolic forms has its source not only in Kant but also deeply in Hegel. The

importance of Socrates as a middle term between these two forms of idealism, for Cassirer, could not be understood until the manuscripts of his fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* were brought to light: *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, ed. D. P. Verene and J. M. Krois, trans. J. M. Krois (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, vol. 1, *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, ed. J. M. Krois (Hamburg: Meiner, 1995). Hereinafter cited as *PSF*, 4, with pagination to the English translation.

2. *Freiheit und Form: Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1916).

3. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3 vols., trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–57); *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1923–27).

4. “The Concept of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem,” in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935–1945*, ed. D. P. Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 49–63. Hereinafter cited as *SMC*.

5. *PSF*, 4, pt. 2 and *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944). Hereinafter cited as *EM*.

6. *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), chap. 17. Cassirer’s criticism of Hegel’s principle that philosophies are their own times apprehended in thoughts could be challenged by a fuller interpretation of Hegel’s political philosophy. I am here following Cassirer’s claims.

7. *SMC*, 59; see also Cassirer’s essay, “Albert Schweitzer as Critic of Nineteenth-Century Ethics,” in *The Albert Schweitzer Jubilee Book*, ed. A. A. Roback (Cambridge, Mass.: Sci-Art Publishers, 1946), 241–57.

8. *PSF*, 4: 127. For a full discussion of the basis phenomena see my *Cassirer’s Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms: A Philosophical Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pt. 2.

9. *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences: Five Studies*, trans. S. G. Lofts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 9.

10. *Ibid.*, 10.

11. *PSF*, 4: 56, 167, 227. Cassirer also uses this term in *The Problem of Knowledge: Philosophy, Science, and History since Hegel*, trans. W. H. Woglom and C. W. Hendel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 19.

12. Cassirer quotes Pope’s line in *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 5.

13. *Ibid.*, vi.

