

Ernst Cassirer

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This is the third article in a series on neglected or misunderstood philosophers. The others have been on Dietzgen (in RP10) and Merleau-Ponty (in RP11). Articles on Collingwood and Foucault are planned; other suggestions would be welcome.

Although the works of Ernst Cassirer are readily available in English, I suspect they only receive limited attention. I shall try to provide some biographical and bibliographical information and also to place him in some philosophical context, in the hope of stimulating wider interest in his work.

Cassirer was born in Breslau in 1874. He began studying at Berlin, where interests in German literature and philosophy inspired a rapid move from the first course he undertook, jurisprudence. Within Germany at this time, there was a new interest in the philosophy of Kant and the idealist tendencies of the 18th century, an interest initiated by Otto Liebmann and Hermann Cohen. Cassirer went to Marburg to study under Cohen, took his doctorate on Leibniz, then returned home to Berlin where he launched into a work aiming to give a comprehensive picture of the development of epistemology in the philosophy and science of modern times. He was under pressure from Cohen to take an academic post but refused because of his dislike of provincial towns with their latent anti-semitism. After the appearance and immediate success of the first two volumes of *The Problem of Knowledge*, Cassirer yielded to Cohen's pressure, providing he got a place at Berlin. This was not easy, because Cassirer was both a Jew and a follower of the controversial Marburg school, while such philosophy as there was at Berlin was decidedly anti-idealistic. He did get his appointment as Privatdozent but only through the intervention of W. Dilthey.

Even after the publication of *Substance and Function* in 1910, Cassirer was still waiting for an improvement in his academic prospects and still being passed over for vacant Chairs. However, immediately after the first World War he was offered a Chair at the new university of Hamburg, where he was eventually made Rector in 1930. Immediately on Hitler's becoming Chancellor of the Third Reich, Cassirer resigned and prepared to emigrate. He was offered three professorships, at Upsala in Sweden, Oxford, and the New School for Social Research in New York. He went to Oxford and lectured there from 1933 to 1935, and in that year accepted a personal chair at Goteborg where he stayed almost six years. In 1941 he went to Yale as visiting professor but was unable to return to Sweden because of the war. He accepted an invitation to teach at Columbia University in 1944 and worked there until his death in April 1945.

While at Marburg Cassirer came under the influence of Kant and he constantly attributed to Kant a fundamental revolution whereby philosophers were freed from having to attain a reality more profound than that given in experience. Cassirer saw the whole history of philosophy not only as an attempt to attain the true knowledge of reality but also as raising questions as to its attainability. The answers of both rationalism and empiricism were followed inevitably by scepticism.

It was the revolution in method effected in Kant's formulation of the problem which first promised a way out of this dilemma... Now knowledge was saved from the peril of sceptical disintegration; but this salvation and liberation proved to be possible only through a shift in the aim of knowledge. Instead of a static relation between knowledge and object - as might be designated by the geometrical notion of a congruence between the two - a dynamic relation was sought and established. No longer does knowledge, whether as a whole or with a part of itself, 'reach over' or 'journey' into the transcendent world of objects. All these spatial images are now recognised as images. Knowledge is described neither as a part of being nor as its copy. However, its relation to being is by no means taken away from it but rather is grounded in a new point of view. For it is now the function of knowledge to build up and constitute the object, not as an absolute object but as a phenomenal object, conditioned by this very function.

(*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Vol. 3, p4-5)
Even with Kant's 'Copernican Revolution', the framework within which knowledge might be said to occur was firmly fixed by the introduction of the Categories. Likewise, the founders of the Marburg school were interested primarily in scientific knowledge. They saw in that the prototype of all knowledge worthy of the name. However, Cassirer became convinced that traditional epistemology, in its usual acceptance of a scientific paradigm, was too narrow. With his interest in *Geisteswissenschaften*, or cultural sciences, he sought to provide epistemological justification for all types of knowledge. He realised that to do this the basic principles of epistemology had to be radically expanded, so that the achievements of the natural sciences did not prejudice the status of non-scientific activity. With this demand for a generalised epistemological basis for all knowledge, Cassirer makes a radical break from the position of orthodox neo-Kantianism but without abandoning the essence of Kantianism itself. In fact he creates ample room within the spirit of that tradition by speaking of man as a 'symbolic animal', drawing on the work of the biologist Uexküll.

(Johannes von Uexküll, *Theoretische Biologie* (2nd ed. Berlin 1938; *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* (1909, 2nd ed. Berlin 1921)

In the human world we find a new characteristic which appears to be the distinctive mark of human life. The functional circle of man is not only quantitatively enlarged; it has also undergone a qualitative change. Man has, as it were, discovered a new way of adapting himself to his environment, between the receptor system and the effector system, which are to be found in all animal species, we find in man a third link which we may describe as the symbolic system. This new acquisition transforms the whole of human life. As compared with the other animals man lives not merely in a broader reality; he lives, so to speak, in a new dimension of reality. There is an unmistakeable difference between organic reactions and human responses. In the first case a direct and immediate answer is given to an outward stimulus; in the second case the answer is delayed. It is interrupted and retarded by a slow and complicated process of thought... No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience. All human progress in thought and experience refines upon and strengthens this net. No longer can man confront reality

immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face... Instead of dealing with the things themselves man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium.

(An Essay on Man, pp24-25)

As the basic concepts of science are obtained by a synthesising act of the mind, so, Cassirer goes on to argue, that synthesising activity of the mind determines all types of knowledge. Our concepts, in whatever field, are man-created intellectual symbols by means of which experiential contexts are established.

Natorp of the Marburg school had stressed that particulars do not remain isolated but are merged into a context determined and defined by causal interrelations. Cassirer extends this, holding that the causal mode of integration is but one of many possible modes. 'Objectification' is achieved and the particular is fused into a context by many means other than logical concepts and laws of logical relations. Art, mythology and religion are all held by Cassirer to exemplify those other possible types of integration - but they do not merely reflect an empirically 'given'. All constitute their 'objects', their 'world' in conformity with some independent principle of integration. Each creates its own symbolic forms, forms which are not of the same type as the symbols of science but which, nevertheless, are epistemologically equivalent to them, coming as they do from the same sources. No one of these differing types of symbols can be fully represented by any other, nor can it be translated into or derived from any other. These types of symbols are not to be regarded as different ways in which the one and same 'thing-in-itself' reveals itself to us - rather, they are modes whereby the mind achieves its 'objectification' of experience. Kant's 'Copernican Revolution' then, has to be extended to all spheres. The validity of each approach cannot be derived from an object, for that object presupposes the symbolic activity and is constituted by it. There is no realm of absolute fact serving as an immutable datum. What

we call fact is always theoretically orientated in some way, seen in regard to some context and implicitly determined thereby. Theoretical elements do not somehow become added to a 'merely factual' but they enter into the constitution of the factual itself.

Cassirer published a number of works on the history of philosophy, notably those on the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and in his more systematic works he makes extensive forays into the history of philosophy. Criticism has been levelled at Cassirer on the lines that his approach to the history of philosophy is limited by his overriding concern for the idea of symbolic form. Such criticism is certainly justified about his last work, *The Myth of the State*, written in 1945, in which Cassirer tried to offer some critical light on the theories that allowed the rise of National Socialism in Germany in the '30s. Here, Cassirer's concern with man's symbolic activity shapes his whole analysis of political thought. He argues that man by his symbolic activity creates his world, and that any attempts to regard symbolic worlds as absolute realities, beyond critical discussion and change, constitutes a denial and evasion of man's proper freedom. If *The Myth of the State* is seen as a history of political thought then there are obvious deficiencies but the work does reveal Cassirer's fundamental concern: to show that what is offered as 'fact' or 'reality' is but one of many possibilities, and that symbolic thought endows man with the ability to constantly reshape his human universe.

Bibliographical Note

Cassirer's most important work is the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. The English translation has a useful introduction to the work of Cassirer by C.W. Hodel (in vol.1). Cassirer also wrote *An Essay on Man* (New Haven, 1944) as an introduction to his thought for English readers.

For a full bibliography to 1964, consult H.J. Paton and R. Kiblansky (eds), *Philosophy and History, Essays presented to Ernst Cassirer*. NY, 1964. For a more comprehensive and critical appreciation of the significance of his work consult P.A. Schilpp (ed), *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, NY, 1949.

Ordinary Language and Radical Philosophy

Vincent di Norcia

Prior to the task of educating the workers, peasants and soldiers, there is the task of learning from them.

Mao Tse-Tung¹

The debate provoked in RP8 by the relatively innocuous editorial comments in RP6 on the problem of 'orthodox English-language philosophy' surprised me. It has seemed unable to sort out the complex relations between radical philosophy and common sense. Some fundamental distinctions are not being made. And they must be made, if one is to develop an emancipatory philosophy and not an ideological one. Sayers, in his zeal to reject ordinary language philosophy (or OLP) tends to see only ideology in ordinary language. Of course OLP has represented a propaganda victory of upper class talk over the levelling realism of plain people's language.² But both usages are part of ordinary language.

The RP editorial itself started with the tradition-

al polarization of Moore's common (?) sense to Russell's logicist scientism. While the debate between ordinary and ideal language models is a historical fact, philosophically it constitutes a pseudo-problem. There is no real dilemma. The choice presented is not between two and only two alternatives. Moreover, the two alternatives presented are not what they appear to be. Russell and company did not provide us with a genuine logic of empirical knowledge or scientific inquiry. Moore and friends gave us at best pedantic reflections on the smart talk of an Oxcam common room (without even the homosexual insinuations which would have given it life). So through these portals the philosophical problems which common sense and science actually raise cannot enter.

The Russell/Moore debate is really between variants of an imperial ideology. The underlying and unspoken issues involved in it are: (1) whether the King's English is the proper model for all common sense. Does it only too 'properly' screen reality through the silken nets of language? Nets woven and mended by the Oxford mandarins of ordinary language philo-

¹ Quoted in RP6, p46

² See Ernst Gellner's *Words and Things* (Penguin, 1968), p266