

Report

Revisiting Ernst Cassirer`s Symbolic Forms

Eirik J. Irgens

Nord-Trøndelag University College
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Revisiting Symbolic Forms

In a position between the logical positivists and the radical Heidegger we find Ernst Cassirer (1874 –1945), both as a mediator in the sense that he facilitated ongoing debates between the two camps, and as a philosopher that steered clear of the dualism represented by the two positions.

According to Michael Friedman, the ways parted after Cassirer left Germany, to the extent that the two traditions became seriously estranged (Friedman 2000, p.157). The analytic or scientific philosophy gained dominance in USA and England. Heidegger's radical philosophy soon dominated continental Europe. Scherer (2003) describes how philosophy of science is the basis of organizational theory and organizational practice. It follows that the parting of the ways, that is; the divergence between the analytic Anglo-Saxon and the radical continental European traditions, also should have influenced organizational theory and practice.

Accordingly, Anglo-Saxon organizational theory should have a bias towards an ontology and epistemology that leans on analytic philosophy, while we should find more relativistic, radical organizational theory at the continent. According to Joanne Martin, it is very much so (Martin 2000):

“Much of the organizational literature, like most fields of social science, reads as if scholars could discover and accurately represent the objectively “true” nature of the empirical world, in accord with being-realism and representational epistemology. This is the dominant view in the United States, particularly in mainstream organizational journals. In contrast, European scholarship often remains open to other viewpoints. In accord with this emphasis on objectivity, in the United States most doctoral students are thought to do organizational research according to the scientific method, using deduction and induction to prove or falsify hypothesis” (Martin 2000, p.396).

Cassirer was forced to leave Germany in 1933 when the Nazis came to power. He then lectured at Oxford University until 1935, when he became professor at Gothenburg University. In 1941 he moved to the United States and Yale University. He moved to New York in 1943 and lectured at Columbia University until his death in 1945.

The Parting of the Ways

In the late 1920's positivism was most significantly represented by the so-called Vienna Circle with influential names such as Moritz Schlick (1882–1936), Otto Neurath (1882 - 1945), and Rudolph Carnap (1891–1970). Their “logical positivism” (also known as neo-positivism) was based on a strong belief in experience as the only source of knowledge; and in the use of logical analysis as the preferred way of clarification of philosophical problems. When Carnap moved to the United States in 1935, he became an important contributor to the advancement of the American tradition often referred to as analytic (or scientific) philosophy, that in turn contributed to the functionalistic traditions in organization theory that according to both Mintzberg (2004) and Ghoshal (2005) have been dominant in American business schools, and which following Czarniawska (2003) have achieved hegemony in the management curricula in most of the western world.

The development of the interpretive tradition (also referred to as romantic, idealistic, relativistic, constructivistic and postmodern) can be understood as a reaction against the dominance of the natural sciences. The reaction came from the social sciences and the humanities in general, and from hermeneutic and phenomenological philosophy in particular. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), and Emilio Betti (1890-1968) were among the contributors to classic hermeneutics, while Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) stands out as one of the most distinctive representatives of late hermeneutics.

At the beginning of the twentieth century; hermeneutic philosophy took a phenomenological turn with the works of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), that is; a turn towards the analysis of consciousness and towards epistemological questions. Husserl's student Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) took phenomenological philosophy steps further in a more radical and relativistic direction. Heidegger, partially due to historical and social reasons, achieved a hegemonic status as the most prominent continental philosopher after world war two. “In Europe, by contrast, the only truly major philosopher left was Heidegger himself, and it is no wonder, then, that what we now call the continental tradition invariably takes its starting point from him”, Michael Friedman states, and continues: “And it was only at this particular point that the two traditions became thoroughly estranged, to the point of almost total mutual

incomprehension, linguistically, geographically, and conceptually” (Friedman 2000, p.157). While analytic (or scientific) philosophy now advanced in USA and England and fueled the tradition within organization theory that now has been so strongly criticized by among others Mintzberg (2004), Czarniawska (2003) and Ghoshal (2005), European continental philosophy became dominated by Heidegger who served as a major influence on the later expansion of relativistic directions such as deconstruction, poststructuralism and postmodernism, directions that stand as antagonistic and seemingly incommensurable counterparts to functionalistic organizational theories.

However, until the Nazi party came to power the positivistic and continental schools were not estranged. Before the ways parted, there was a common dialogue and interaction between the representatives of the different schools, as illustrated by Michael Friedman in “A Parting of the Ways. Carnap, Cassirer and Heidegger” (Friedman, 2000). Friedman analyzes a meeting in the spring of 1929 in Davos in Switzerland. Martin Heidegger, who had just completed his main work *Being and Time*, was to present a series of lectures together with Ernst Cassirer (1874 –1945), at that time a leading philosopher in Germany. The Vienna Circle logical positivist Rudolph Carnap, who in 1928 had published *The Logical Structure of the World*, also took part in this three week intensive international university course.

Friedman shows how, until then, there had been an ongoing and constructive dialogue between the different schools of thought, including the logical positivists on the one side and the representatives of the continental school on the other. After the weeks in the spring of 1929, historical circumstances, most of all the rise of Hitler, led to the emigration of many outstanding intellectuals, which again led to the divergence between the analytic Anglo-Saxon tradition and the continental European. The ways divided, according to Friedman, and the constructive dialogue ended. The result being two very different schools of thought, now practiced for the most part in isolation from one another.

So where should those start who are interested in beginning a reconciliation of the analytic and continental traditions? Friedman identifies weaknesses in both Heidegger’s and Carnap’s thinking, and after a thorough analysis he recommends the lesser known Ernst Cassirer: “(One) can find no better starting point than the rich treasure of ideas, ambitions, and analysis stored in his astonishingly comprehensive body of philosophical work” (Friedman 2000, p.159).

As Scherer points out; philosophy of science is the very basis of organization theory and organization practice (Scherer, 2003). This paper is an attempt to understand the philosophy of symbolic forms, as well as identifying some of the most important origins of Cassirer's philosophy.

'Unveiling the Ultimate Reality'

After concentrated studies at the Warburg Library in the years 1922-1925, Ernst Cassirer released his three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* in 1923, 1925, and 1929. In *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (and I will from now on frequently use the abbreviation 'PSF') Cassirer tries to develop an account of the logical structure of three major areas of man's cultural life – myth, language, and science. He does so by showing how the general categories of thought, such as space, time, substance, cause, and number acquire content differently in each of these three symbolic forms (Verene, 1969, p.40-41). The symbolic forms are areas of man's cultural life, illustrating the historical development of human consciousness, and representing different angles of refractions and logics that man can take on reality. They are not to be understood as classes of perceptions or objects, but they rather represent different perspectives that can be taken of any object, according to Verene. In PSF, Cassirer chose to discuss the three categories myth, language, and science as focal symbolic forms. However, about fifteen years later, writing *An Essay on Man* (1944, which I will abbreviate 'EOM'), he included chapters on religion, history and art as well. In PSF-2 he also mentioned the possibility that ethics, law, economics, and technology could be treated as symbolic forms (PSF 2, p.xiv-xv). Verene concludes: "It seems clear that for Cassirer any area of culture is potentially a symbolic form; and whether any area of culture is a symbolic form would appear determined by whether it can be shown to have a distinctive logical structure. For Cassirer, in a manner analogue to Hegel, all symbolic forms are potentially present in each stage of consciousness (Verene 1969, p.44). Verene believes that in choosing myth, language, and science as the three major functions of consciousness in PSF, Cassirer was reasoning from ordinary distinctions used in the empirical history of consciousness to their systematic dimensions (Verene 1969, p.44).

According to Cassirer, reality is cloaked as well as revealed in symbolic forms (SF 3, p.1). Symbolic forms open, illuminate, and hides reality. They offer different perspectives, angles

and logics that may shed light on, or veil, aspects of reality. Cassirer thus sees his philosophy as an endeavor into the distinctiveness of these different forms:

“The philosophy of Symbolic Forms is nothing other than an attempt to assign each of them, as it were, its own specific and peculiar index of refraction. The philosophy of Symbolic Forms aspires to know the special nature of the various refracting media, to understand each one according to its nature and the laws of its structure.” (SF 3, p.1).

Cassirer explains his philosophical journey as an attempt to unveil the ultimate reality, the reality of “being” itself. He quotes Spinoza in saying that it is the essence of light to illumine itself and the darkness, so at some point there must be an immediate self-revelation and reality. Epistemologically he claims that “...thought and reality ought not merely to correspond to each other in some sense but must permeate each other” (SF 3, p 2). The function of thought should not be merely to “express” being, that is, to apprehend and classify it under one of its own categories of meaning. Thought should instead “deal with reality on equal footing” (SF 3, p 2). Thought and the object toward which it is directed are one, and not to be treated as separated unities.

Cassirer’s Main Points of Departure

Verene points out that most commentators hold Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms as fundamentally derived from Kant. However, Verene claims that Cassirer builds the presuppositions of “symbolic forms” on Hegel, rather than on Kant. He refers to Cassirer himself, who regarded Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* as the foundation work of his own *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. “In defending his theory of symbolic forms and the theory of man that underlies it, Cassirer selects Hegel rather than Kant”, Verene concludes (Verene 1969, p.36). He also holds forth that some of the problems commentators have pointed to in Cassirer’s philosophy can be largely solved through a closer attention to Cassirer’s relation to Hegel.

Verene points out that Cassirer regarded Hegel’s distinction between science and sensory consciousness as analogous to his own distinction between science and mythical knowledge. In relation to Hegel, Cassirer sees *mythical consciousness* as an earlier and more fundamental stage of mind than Hegel’s stage of sensory consciousness (Verene 1969, p.35-36). The way

Cassirer discusses knowledge in relation to mythical consciousness seems to parallel Hegel’s discussion of science in relation to sensory consciousness, as I have tried to depict in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Sensory vs. mythical consciousness in Hegel’s and Cassirer’s philosophy

Symbolic Forms as Stages in the Development of Man

In the third volume of PSF, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, Cassirer, like Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Mind*, distinguishes three major stages in the historical development of mind. Like Hegel, he also describes these stages in terms of the mind’s relationship to its objects. There are, however, some differences in their philosophies. In Hegel’s phenomenology there is a development from a *Bewusstsein* to a *Selbstbewusstsein* leading to an *Aufheben* to *Geist* / Mind. I have tried to illustrate Hegel’s dialectics in Figure 2: The Dialectics of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*

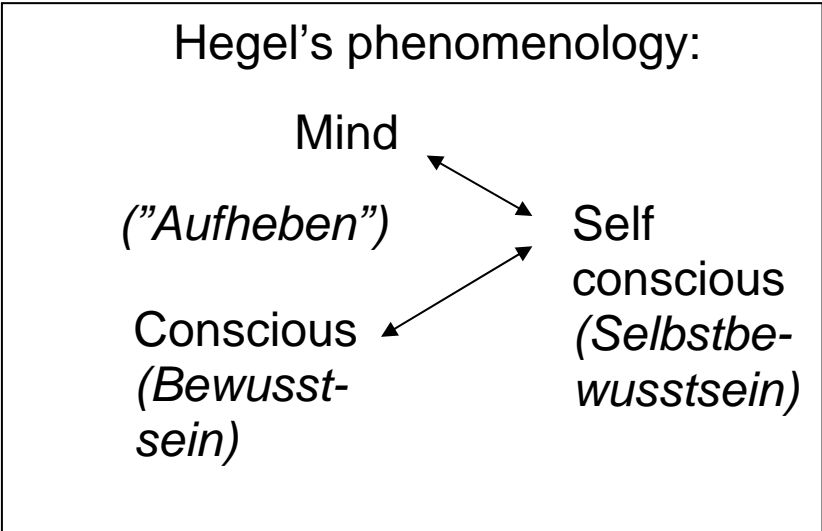


Figure 2: The Dialectics of Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind

The first of Cassirer's functions is the expressive function of consciousness, or *Ausdrucksfunktion*. The second is the representational function, or *Darstellungsfunktion*. The third is the conceptual function, or *reine Bedeutungsfunktion*. Verene shows how these three functions stand in a dialectical relationship to each other. The expressive function of consciousness is a stage of the simple unity of symbol and object. No genuine distinction is made between symbol and object (PSF 3, p.67-69). The representational function is a stage of disjunction or severance of symbol and object: The object is viewed as wholly other than the symbol (PSF 3 :112-114). The conceptual function is a stage in which the separation is overcome: The object is viewed as a construction of the symbol, as a symbol of different order (PSF 3, p.283-285). The three stages of Cassirer's phenomenology correspond in terms of their general conception to the three stages of Hegel's phenomenology in Figure 2. Their progression parallels Hegel's *Aufheben*, where each stage is both the cancellation and the preservation of the former stage. I have illustrated Cassirer dialectics in Figure 3.

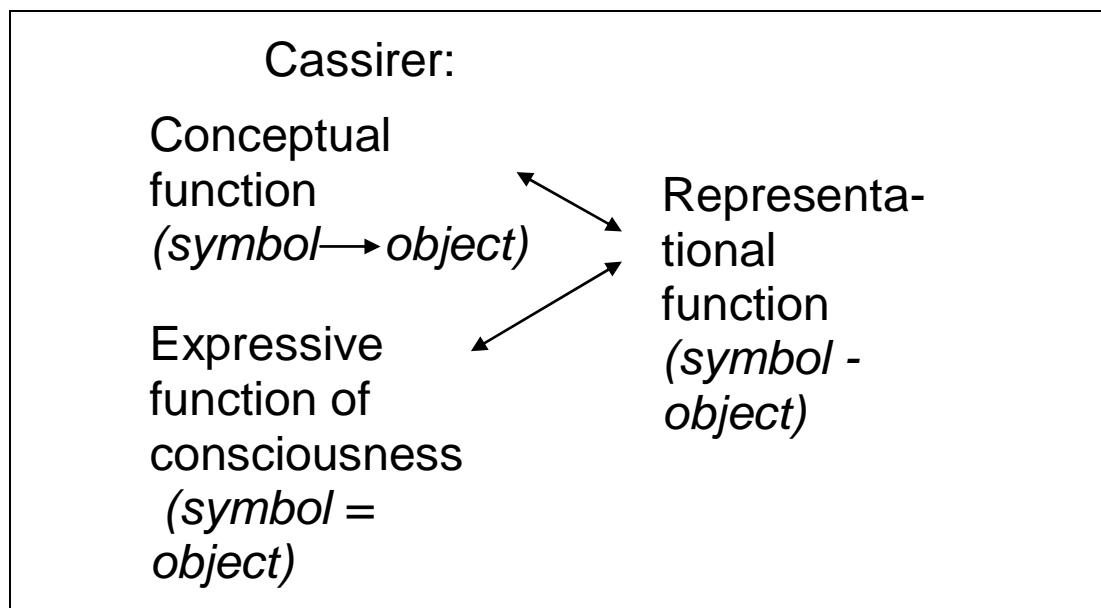


Figure 3: Cassirer's three major stages in the historical development of mind

It is the "fundamental principle" that the forms of consciousness are to be viewed as products of a single unitary development that creates the agreement. But, in spite of all similarities Verene also claims that Cassirer's phenomenology differs from Hegel's in three major respects:

- (1) its conception of the fundamental stage of consciousness and the consequent alignment of succeeding stages,
- (2) its method of description of each stage;
- (3) its lack of a terminating stage of philosophical knowledge.

(Verene 1969, p.39)

In the following I will inquire into the philosophy of symbolic forms, with a special eye for the particularities that I find most relevant in relation to the study of organizations and the teaching of management.

Reality cloaked and revealed in Symbolic Forms

Discussing the methodological beginning of natural science, Cassirer points to a *regressus ad infinitum*, an everlasting regress. Behind all reality held to be true and objective, another reality will rise up. It is impossible to call a halt to this progress and so secure an absolute solid “foundation” of knowledge, Cassirer holds forth (SF 3, p. 19). According to Cassirer, even the modern physicist tends to dismiss any epistemological doubt as to the definitive character of his concept of reality. With Planck Cassirer finds a conclusive definition of reality in the identification of the real with the measurable. This is a realm of the measurable that is, Cassirer continues; self-explanatory and sustains itself. The reason why natural sciences shun the method of dialectic thinking is the anxiety of being undermined; he claims (SF 3, p. 19). And Cassirer states: The positivists are incapable of expressing and exhausting the truly positive aspects of psychology through their positive theory of knowledge (SF 3, p. 27).

To Cassirer, the world is given to us through immediate sensations. It breaks down into a diversity of sensory impressions. However, classification does not necessarily lead to concreteness and determinacy, as illustrated by Cassirer by classification of primitive sense perceptions such as smell and colors. The role of the language is to try to designate determinate qualities, but these processes usually proceed indirectly; an abstraction of smell is not possible. The designation of determinate qualities proceeds indirectly through substances which it has coined on the basis of other sensory-intuitive data. (SF 3, p. 129)

In the highest objective senses, in hearing and vision, a distance is achieved, Cassirer holds forth. It is a trend towards representation that is unmistakably present, unfulfilled, in the

sense that the “objective” content stops “at the limit of our own body”. The tactile sense is somehow different, Cassirer states, in the way that it represents an important step toward raising impressions to representations. The tactile sense has been called the true sense of reality, Cassirer points out, a sense whose phenomena have the most efficient sense of reality. But also when it comes to the tactile sense, even though it has a peculiar tendency to objectivization, it stops half way. It remains bipolar in the sense that we have a subjective component, relating to our body, which inevitably goes hand in hand with another component, oriented toward things and their attributes (SF 3, p. 130). Reality and representative function is one:

“For the reality of a phenomenon cannot be separated from its representative function; it ceases to be the same as soon as it signifies something different, as soon as it points to another total complex as its background” (SF 3, p 141)

The problem of the representation

In volume 1 of *The philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer dwells on the problem of the representation. The whole is not obtained from its parts, he states (SF 1, p. 102): On the contrary, every notion of a part already encompasses the notion of the whole, as to general structure and form, not as to content. Every particular belongs to a definite complex: “It is the totality of these rules which constitutes the true unity of consciousness, as a unity of time, space, objective synthesis, etc.” (SF 1, p. 102). He holds forth that the traditional language of psychology does not offer an entirely adequate term for these states of affairs. Only through gestalt psychology has the discipline moved away from a fundamental sensationalism. “For the sensationalist approach, which sees all objectivity as encompassed in the “simple” impression, synthesis consists merely in the “association” of impressions.” (SF 1, p 102). “Association” may have many meanings, but to Cassirer sensationalist approaches does not shed light on “...the diversity of the paths and directions by which consciousness arrives at its synthesis” (SF 1, p. 103). In true synthesis of consciousness, the relation of the parts is fundamentally surpassed in the relation of the “whole” to the “parts”. “Here the whole does not originate in its parts, it constitutes them and gives them their essential meaning” (SF 1, p. 103). We relate a limited segment of space to the whole of space. Thinking of a particular moment of time we encompass the universal form of succession. This is an

interdetermination that is different from association. Association leaves interdetermination unexplained, instead it states the contiguity of ideas.

At this point in his discussion Cassirer distinguishes his position from rationalistic as well as empiricist theories of knowledge, as indicated by me in Figure 4.

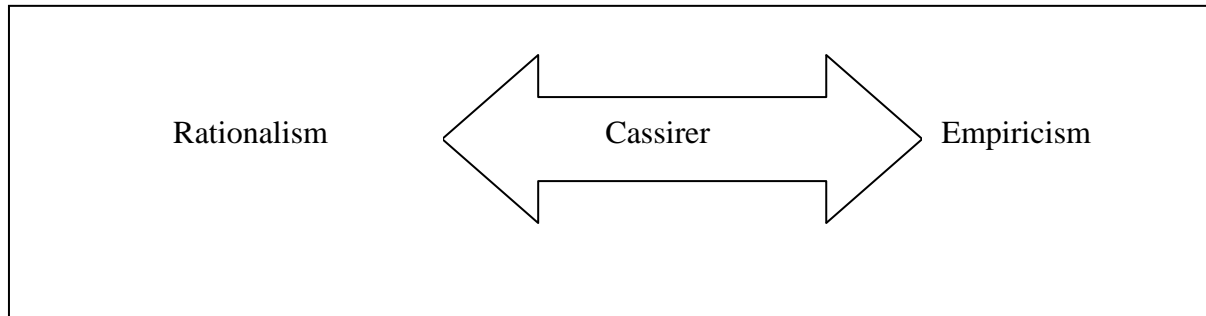


Figure 4: Cassirer between Rationalism and Empiricism

Rationalistic theories, in Cassirer's account, aims at saving and demonstrating the independence of "meaning". Rationalistic theory confirmed Descartes' dictum that the unity of the objective world can be apprehended by perception, through and only through the reflection of the mind on itself, that is, by *inspection menis*. (SF 3, p.103). In contrast we find the empiricist theory of association. And here Cassirer prepares his ground, claiming: "but it fails to overcome the inner tension between two fundamentally different elements of consciousness, between its mere "matter" and its pure "form"". (SF 1, p.103). Descartes' ideas of what Cassirer calls "outward perception", lightness and darkness, roughness and smoothness, colored and resonant, are presented merely as subjective elements. But Cassirer wishes to bring us beyond this stage, from the variabilities of impressions to the unity and constancy of the object. That takes the function of judgment and what Cassirer calls "unconscious inference", which is "totally independent of the impressions". (SF 1: 104)

Fluid impressions molded by symbolic action

Cassirer holds forth that to Descartes' metaphysical dualism is said to be rooted in his methodological dualism, that is; a theory of absolute division between the substance of extension and the thinking substance. Turning to Kant, he points out that this antithesis between sensibility and thought, material and formal determinants of consciousness, is more than evident in the beginning of Critique of Pure Reason. However, Cassirer claims that Kant

after all opens for the possibility that there may be a stronger connection between the two based on common roots that are unknown to us.

In contrast to the empiricists, Cassirer argues for “integration” instead of “association”, as illustrated in Figure 5: Integration vs. Association.

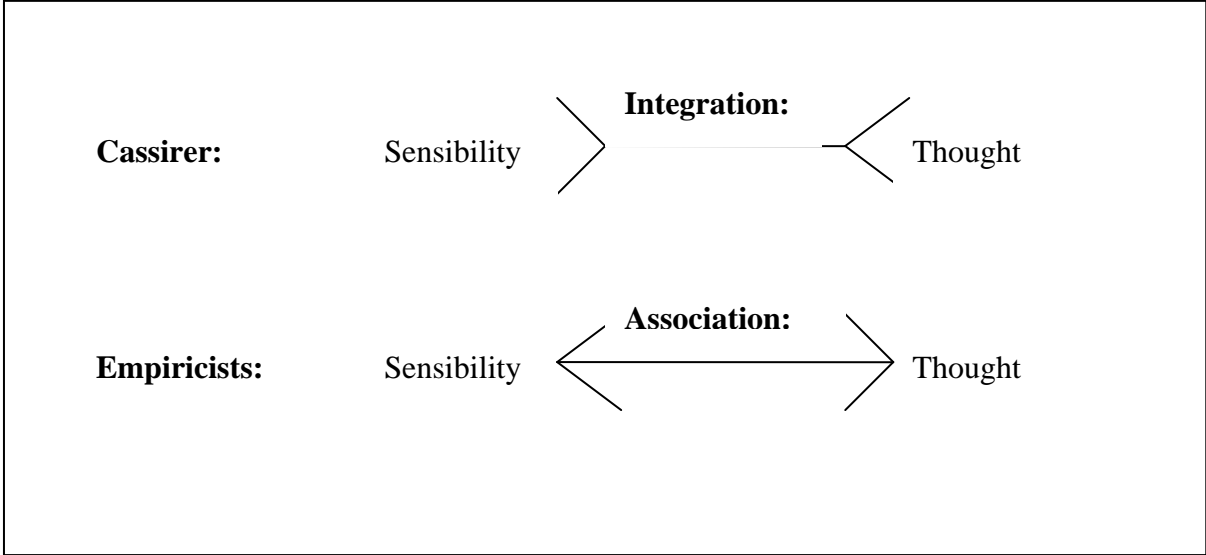


Figure 5: Integration vs. Association

The elements of consciousness are related to the whole of consciousness as a differential to an integral, Cassirer explains. The nature of a content of consciousness exists only “in so far as it immediately goes beyond itself in various directions of synthesis.” (SF 1: 104): Moments contains reference to temporal succession, a single point in space contains reference to space as the sum of all possible designations of position. Cassirer here seems to be in harmony with Gadamer’s ideas of the hermeneutic circle; as the whole is expressed through the particular and vice versa.

Cassirer stresses the relation: The relation becomes necessary and immediately intelligible when it is considered from the standpoint of consciousness, he claims. (SF 1, p.105) “For here there is not from the very start an abstract “one”, confronted with an equally abstract and detached “other”; here the one is “in” the many and the many is “in” the one: in the sense that each determines and represents the other” (SF 1, p. 105).

When Cassirer turns to the ideational content of the sign, he also clarifies the relation between the chaos of fluid sensory impressions and how they become clear and take form: “The fluid

impression assumes form and duration for us only when we *mold it* by symbolic action in one direction or another” (SF 1: 107). And he continues by illustrating how this “molding” takes different directions through different symbolic forms, a passage that I find so central in understanding the idea of symbolic forms that I prefer to quote it in full:

“In science and language, in art and myth, this formative process proceeds in different ways and according to different principles, but all these spheres have this in common: that the product of their activity in no way resembles the mere *material* by which they began. It is in the basic symbolic function and its various directions that the spiritual consciousness and the sensory consciousness are first truly differentiated. It is here that we pass beyond passive receptivity to an indeterminate outward material, and begin to place upon it our independent imprint which articulates it for us into diverse spheres and forms of reality. Myth and art, language and science, are in this sense configurations *towards* being: they are not simple copies of an existing reality but represent the main directions of the spiritual movement, of the ideal process by which reality is constituted for us as one and many – as a diversity of forms which are ultimately held together by a unity of meaning” (SF 1: 107).

Consciousness is representation and mediation. All forms of consciousness appear in the form of a temporal process, but in the course of the process Cassirer claims that certain types of “form” tend to detach themselves (SF 1: 110, Cassirer’s own quotation marks). The different symbolic forms realize this universal tendency in different ways. Language, myth, art and the intellectual symbols of science mediate differently. These are forms that Cassirer understands as “immediate forms of living” (SF 1: 110). These forms are at the same time offering certain fixed points or resting places, and constantly renewing processes of consciousness. In the symbolic forms, consciousness retains a character of constant flux, articulated itself around certain fixed centers of form and meaning.

Modern Science, Vico, and Poetic Knowledge

In the chapter “Philosophical idealism”, Cassirer maintains that Plato’s sharp boundary between the concept “as such” and its representations gradually tends to disappear through the history of logic and epistemology (SF 1, p.126). Cassirer’s own philosophy is an expression of the relational, processual flux of consciousness where reality is mediated through forms. As Cassirer later points out in *An Essay on Man* (1944), an understanding of these

epistemological processes may offer us channels to a deeper understanding of reality, to more realistic knowledge about the world. However, when modern science became a hallmark of enlightenment, knowledge became something that could be reached through deduction. Science is, according to Cassirer, oriented toward general relations and inferences, toward deductive combinations (SF 1, p.138). All true knowledge then consists in creating names and combining them into sentences and judgments. Truth and falsehood become attributes of language, and not attributes of things. Consequently, a spirit deprived of language would lack all power over these attributes and would be unable to distinguish the true and the false (SF 1, p.138).

As Cassirer stresses years later in *An Essay on Man* (1944), science is one of many symbolic forms, but a form that has gained an undisputed position, and which Cassirer himself evaluates as the uppermost representation of man's development. However, Cassirer's endeavor is to give an account of the different forms that are at hand for man. Man is characterized by the ability to choose angles of refraction, and the choices made have distinct consequences. Science as a symbolic form is a channel to certain parts of the reality, not to the reality. Science reduces and classifies, which implies an impoverishment of the world. It is an effective channel to the surface structures of the world. But in order to achieve realistic knowledge, science alone is a too narrow form.

Not surprisingly, Cassirer turns to Vico in his discussion of alternative forms of knowledge. Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) was known as a stern combatant to Descartes. Vico claimed that Descartes' axioms could not be transferred to social science without problems. Vico built on Aristotle when he claimed that *phronesis* is a knowledge of a peculiar kind, an everyday knowledge that cannot be revealed by the means of scientific methods. This is a kind of "poetic wisdom", rather than universal truths, based on a 'sensus communis' – a collective meaning and understanding that is not based on mathematics, but constructed through a poetic language: fables, parables, metaphors, religion, pictures and hieroglyphs are examples of how poetic knowledge was created. It is a sort of knowledge that is based on poetic language, not on Descartes' notion of reasoning.

Cassirer points out that Vico posed the problem of language within the sphere of a general metaphysics of the spirit (SF 1, p.149). "He too rejected the theory that the original words of language were attributed solely to convention; he too insisted on a "natural" relation between them and their meanings", Cassirer states (SF 1, p.149). If our present phase in the

development of language does not longer reveal this relation, it is merely a consequence of a movement away from its true sources. And the true sources are the language of the gods and heroes. Nearly all words are derived from natural properties of things or from natural sensory impressions and feelings. One could imagine a sort of “universal dictionary” based on the original unity of ideas. And in Vico’s world, Cassirer claims; nouns preceded verbs in the historical development of language, something that Vico exemplifies with the speech of children and persons afflicted with pathological speech disturbances.

Although Cassirer admits that Vico’s theory of the development of language may seem both strange and baroque, he also holds forth that Vico’s theory offers a fruitful approach to the inquiry into the problem of language. Feelings and emotions lay the foundation for speech, which in turn was the basis for language. When the eighteenth century, after nearly two decades of celebrating rationality, turned from rationality to feelings, Vico’s theory of the origin of language became important again, and was picked up by among others Rousseau.

Cassirer’s discussion of Vico, and in particular Vico’s theory of language, points forward to his discussion of language as symbolic form in *An Essay of Man* (1944), where he treats language together with science as a way of gaining knowledge of reality, but a way that does not fully grasp the deepness and richness of reality, and thus must be combined with other forms, and in particular art, in order to achieve a realistic view the world.

On Symbolic Forms and the Philosophical Underpinnings of Organizational Theory

Cassirer’s philosophy is indeed broad and ambitious. He is sometimes vague and leaves a lot to the reader’s imagination. (As such he is, of course, far from being in a special position as a philosopher). However, Neher (2005) claims that there were reasons for Cassirer’s lack of precision: One was that he did not want to limit his philosophical approach. “The ‘Philosophy of Symbolic Forms’ cannot and does not try to be a philosophical system in the traditional sense of this word”, Neher claims (Neher 2005, p. 364). Cassirer did not want to overly determine the symbolic form’s range of application. The reasons why I after all have chosen to inquire into Cassirer, are as follows:

- (1) First, the particular historical circumstances that forced Cassirer to leave Germany. One of the consequences of Cassirer leaving was that the ongoing debate between the logical positivists of the Vienna circle and radical philosophy as represented by above all Heidegger was brought to an end. Another consequence was that by leaving Europe, continental philosophy was left for Heidegger to dominate, while Anglo-Saxon philosophy became dominated by the analytic tradition.
- (2) Second, organizational theory seems to have been plagued by a split between two main schools, rooted in the philosophical underpinnings represented by the two main directions in philosophy.
- (3) Cassirer was not only a mediating force that facilitated a fruitful dialogue between the two schools, but through his philosophy of symbolic forms, and perhaps most clearly shown in *An Essay on Man* (1944), he also developed a perspective that combined the two schools.
- (4) Cassirer's writing style seems to reflect his interest in both science and arts. He combines logical reasoning with literary writing and draws on examples from different artforms and a broad array of schools. This turns the shared reading of Cassirer into a joyful experience.
- (5) Cassirer does not only present a philosophy, but also claims that taking his philosophy into action may turn you into a better practitioner.

The very basic idea underpinning Cassirer's concept of Man as opposed to Animal, is that we are capable of changing perspective. Symbolic forms are examples of culturally developed perspectives (Neher, 2005). Where Kant claimed that human reason finds itself in a realm of contradictions and darkness, Cassirer offers a more optimistic and proactive solution: Through an understanding of symbolic forms, and how the varying forms constitute our understanding of the world, man may enlarge his capacity to interact with the *real* world, to get a more *objective* view of the world. It is culturally and epistemologically a pluralistic perspective, but it does not lead to, or is not meant to lead to, solipsism or to radical relativism. Our understanding of the world is constituted by the various forms that are historically and culturally expressions of man's development of consciousness, but we are not confined within the borders of these forms, we are not merely in a Heideggerian tradition a spider that is incarcerated in its own web as an extension of itself, and we are not doomed to live in different incommensurable professional prisons where scholars are unable to communicate across paradigms (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). It is through an understanding of

the particularities of the various forms as well as the ability to change perspective where Cassirer points out a more optimistic and proactive solution.

Seduced by Cassirer?

So much said: There are several reasons why one should keep a critical distance to Cassirer. First of all; Cassirer may be very seducing. To me, the contrahistorical perspective is particularly fascinating. To try to picture how philosophy in general and organizational theory in particular would have developed *if* Cassirer was not forced to depart Europe and leave continental Europe open for Heidegger to dominate (Friedman, 2000; Friedman, 2002; Friedman, 2005), triggers my fascination. Second, Cassirer's use of examples from brain impaired patients long before neuroscience got access to brain scanning methods is captivating. Third; Cassirer takes his own medicine, in the sense that he draws on allegories and examples from various parts of man's cultural life, which makes his works tremendously rich. Fourth, it is also a question of writing style: In Cassirer's work aesthetic and logical-rational writing styles meet, and creates a seducing power. In that sense, the seducing style of Cassirer parallels what some scholars have pointed out applies to Karl Weick's writing as well (Van Maanen, 1995). And fifth and last; Cassirer promises that I will become a better practitioner if I become capable of applying different symbolic forms, which naturally triggers my fascination.

Seduction implies being drawn to something. You may loose distance, and you may loose your critical sense. On the other side; sometimes seduction is quite all right. All the more; sometimes you have to let go of critical distance in order to experience the sweetness of sensuous pleasure. It is a delight to dive into Cassirer's philosophy. Cassirer's philosophy transforms the project of modernity in accord with the limitations of the modern conception of rationality, according to Lofts (Lofts, 2000). He influenced the Russian author and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin to the point where Bakhtin has been accused of plagiarism of Cassirer (Poole & Hitchcock, 1998). But due to historical circumstances the momentum he represented was lost along the way. There is still work to be done if Cassirer's philosophy is to gain stronger influence on organizational theory.

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