

More than a Linguistic Turn in Philosophy: the Semiotic Programs of Peirce and Cassirer

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Written texts are the most obvious examples of articulated thoughts. Since thought is a stream, the use of language to give it structure also pares down and fixes the scope of our awareness. This problem has concerned philosophers since Plato. Plato himself evidently believed in the possibility of intuition, somehow just “seeing” what is the case. Yet even Plato believed that this insight had to be prepared for by means of dialogue or dialectic. Although language has long preoccupied philosophers, it became their primary in the twentieth century. Few slogans have been as aptly chosen as Richard Rorty’s designation “the Linguistic Turn” for the changes in twentieth-century philosophy. The same year that Rorty’s reader of that name appeared in Chicago, Derrida published in Paris his *Grammatologie*, the science of writing.¹ The former offered a clarion call to watch what you say in order to be clear while the other seemed to inaugurate a new level of inscrutability in philosophy, appearing to toy with the phenomenon of meaning itself. Yet they both called attention to the same fact that the phenomenon of linguistic expression was not a secondary aspect of thought and actually it was philosophy’s foremost concern.

Philosophers usually thought that they were getting to the bottom of things by engaging in reflection or argument, thereby overlooking the even more fundamental fact of their own words. Phenomenologists, e.g., claimed to be getting back to the “Sachen selbst,” but this was carried out by writing texts and giving lectures. A casual remark once made by Fichte sums up the basic assumption of all earlier philosophy: “If I produce a new conception, then the sign whereby I designate it *for you* (since for me myself there is no need for any kind of sign) is something new for you; the word contains a new meaning, since previously you were not in possession of what it designates”.² With this,

¹ Richard Rorty: *The Linguistic Turn in Philosophy. Recent essays in philosophical method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967). Jacques Derrida: *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Éd. de Minuit, 1967).

² See, e.g., Fichte, ‘Aus einem Privatschreiben’ (1800), in *Fichtes sämtliche Werke*, vol.V, pp. 375–396, here, p. 383: “Erzeuge ich in mir einen neuen Begriff, so bedeutet freilich das Zeichen, wodurch ich ihn *für euch* bezeichne (denn für mich selbst bedürfte es überall keines

Fichte stated the basic assumption of the idealistic program of philosophy: that philosophy deals with ideas and not with their particular articulations. Sixty-eight years after Fichte wrote this, Charles Peirce published what remains the most radical attack ever upon this idealistic program of philosophy: his two essays concerning “faculties claimed for man,” in particular the capacity to know by intuition.³ Using the consciously anachronistic form of a scholastic “disputed question,” Peirce showed that the idealistic program was based upon a mistake: the belief that signs give expression to thoughts. In reality, thought and signs are the same. Even phenomenology was based upon the same mistake, for as Peirce put it: “the idea of manifestation is the idea of a sign.”⁴ Peirce’s arguments all served to make the point that “there is no intuition,” thinking is the process of semiosis – the interpretation of signs. To have a “semiotic program” for philosophy entails dispensing with idealism, at least insofar as it is a non-semiotic program.

Peirce was the founder of Pragmatism, which elevated action to a new place in philosophy. Previously, philosophy had been assumed to be a matter of contemplation, speculation, and “theory,” but Peirce considered these to be inseparable from questions concerning possible effects and action. Peirce was disappointed by the way Pragmatism was interpreted by his contemporaries, so he changed his name for it to the grotesque “Pragmaticism” in order, as he put it, to keep his ugly child safe from kidnappers. The point of Pragmatism was not that it took its departure from utilitarian considerations of “usefulness;” practicality was a secondary matter, for practicality depended upon the way things behaved. The point was rather that philosophy needed to begin with embodiment – the embodiment of thought in signs, of beliefs in habits of action, and the “mind” in the body. Usefulness was a topic that entered the scene only after these fundamental processes had been taken into consideration. They had nothing to do with utility; they are what make utility possible.

Zeichens), für euch etwas neues, das Wort erhält eine neue Bedeutung, da Ihr bisher das Bezeichnete gar nicht besessen habet.” The same attitude can be found in Hobbes and Locke and as late as Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (1927; Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1972), § 17, e.g., p. 78, where signs are taken to be mere “Zeug” (equipment) to express thoughts.

³ Peirce’s ‘Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man’ and ‘Some Consequences of Four Incapacities’ first appeared in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 2 (1868): 103–114 and 140–157.

⁴ See Charles Sanders Peirce: *Collected Papers*, ed. by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard, 1931), vol. 1, par. 346 (from Lowell Lectures of 1903). Hereafter cited as *Collected Papers* with volume and paragraph number.

To have a semiotic “program” for philosophy means prescribing a course of study based upon the theory of signs and symbols rather than upon a theory of “ideas”. Unlike different philosophical “methods” (such as “phenomenology,” “hermeneutics,” “conceptual analysis,” “linguistic analysis”), which provide the way a topic is to be studied, a program in philosophy proposes the object for study (ideas, meanings, signs).

The concept of “meaning” (German: Sinn) can be interpreted to fall either within the idealistic or the semiotic program for philosophy. Most philosophers limit their considerations of meaning, however, to language. With the prominent exception (in the English-speaking world) of Nelson Goodman, signs and symbols other than language and the semiotic character of perception itself have been largely ignored by philosophers. In particular, most philosophers limit the investigation of meaning to language. Charles Peirce and Ernst Cassirer did not.

Independently of each other, Peirce and Cassirer created a semiotic program for philosophy, and they did so by beginning in the same way: by critically reappraising Kantianism. Peirce’s philosophy was based upon what he called “semeiotic,”⁵ while Cassirer entitled his main work *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Cassirer’s and Peirce’s triadic theories of signs and symbols are remarkably similar, yet from what seems to be largely the same theoretical orientation they derived very different programs for philosophy. The point of this paper is to demonstrate what this divergence implies for philosophy.

Philosophers – and not only philosophers – have traditionally considered signs and symbols merely as the means for communicating ideas. The ideas themselves – the “concepts” – were taken to be independent of signs. Philosophers were interested in the ideas, not their particular expression; hence philosophy’s program of study was “idealistic” and not “semiotic”.

Independently of one another, Peirce and Cassirer both turned from this ancient conception to a theory of meaning as embodied in signs and symbols, but the similarity of their transformation of philosophy has received scant attention from philosophers. It’s easy to understand why.⁶ Both men were

⁵ Peirce preferred to spell the name of the theory of signs and symbols as “semeiotic,” which offers a way to distinguish his theory; Sausurre named his theory “semiologie”.

⁶ The only essays on the topic of Cassirer’s and Peirce’s philosophies or their semiotic programs known to me are (in chronological order): John Michael Krois, ‘Peirce and Cassirer: The Philosophical Importance of a Theory of Signs’, in *Proceedings of the C. S. Peirce Bicentennial International Congress*, ed. by Kenneth L. Ketner, et al. (Lubbock: Texas Tech University

steeped in the history of philosophy and science as well as in the study of languages, and each worked in a host of empirical fields of study ranging from science to literature and ethnology. They wrote for readers who could follow them into all these areas. To study Cassirer or Peirce is a considerable challenge demanding the reader to engage in historical and empirical questions as well as argument. Given that both published extensively and each left behind massive unpublished writings, it would take a whole research team to undertake a comparative study of their work. But even regarded superficially, it is obvious that these two philosophers had astonishingly similar conceptions of philosophy, based upon the centrality of signs and symbols instead of logic. Both explicitly called attention to this break with the tradition of philosophy.⁷ If their philosophies are as closely related as I am suggesting, the interesting question then becomes: how do they differ? – and, most interesting of all: why? My conclusion will be that they diverge in one systematic point dramatically, and that in this regard, Cassirer's conception corrects a problem in Peirce's approach to semiotics and so suggests another program for philosophy based upon this difference in their semiotic programs. These offer roads, to borrow a metaphor of Kant's, that remain open to philosophy.

(1) Similarities

Peirce probably never knew of Cassirer, and Cassirer never indicates any particular awareness of Peirce. This said, the first similarity between Peirce and Cassirer is that both were better informed about the history of philosophy and science than any other creative philosophers of their times. Both took Kant and Hegel seriously, especially Kant. Both were mathematicians – Peirce's *New*

Press, 1981), pp. 99–104; John Michael Krois, 'Semiotische Transformation der Philosophie. Verkörperung und Pluralismus bei Cassirer und Peirce'. *Dialektik*, 1 (1995): 61–72; Frederik Stjernfeldt, 'Die Vermittlung von Anschauung und Denken: Semiotik bei Kant, Cassirer und Peirce'. *Zeitschrift für Semiotik*, 22 (2000): 341–368; 'Symbol and Schema in Neo-Kantian Semiotics – The Philosophies of Cassirer and Peirce: Contributions to a Semiotics Implying an Epistemology', in *Forms of Knowledge and Sensibility: Ernst Cassirer and the Human Sciences*, ed. by Gunnar Foss and Eivind Kasa (Kristiansand: Norwegian University Press, 2002), pp. 119–148; Enno Rudolph, 'Symbolismus statt Realismus: Peirce and Cassirer', in *Ernst Cassirer im Kontext* (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr, 2003), pp. 40–55.

⁷ Peirce spoke of logic "as" semeiotic; Cassirer too substitutes what he calls "symbolic form" and "semiotics" for pan-logicism. See his general introduction to his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1: *Language*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), esp. pp. 82–86.

Elements of Mathematics is proof enough of his expertise in this area.⁸ Cassirer was known at Yale to quickly fill a lecture hall blackboard with calculations in order to explicate quantum theory,⁹ and his correspondence with scientists often involves mathematical topics. Peirce is credited with founding pragmatism. What is pragmatism? It can be expressed this way in reference to the world: “An object consists solely of that, as which it gives itself to us: a sum of actual and possible effects”.¹⁰ It can be put this way in reference to the actor: “Not mere observation, but rather actions are the middle point from which, for human beings, the intellectual organization of reality takes its beginnings”.¹¹ These statements are pure pragmatism, and they both stem from Cassirer. Historians of philosophy don’t treat Cassirer in reference to pragmatic thought; however they should.¹² Consider Cassirer’s treatment of the concept of causality. Hume argued that we cannot see causality in nature; it is only a matter of our habit of associating one thing with something else after observing their constant conjunction. Kant declared the concept of causation to be an a priori or pure concept of the understanding, determining the nature of experience and not derived from it. Cassirer concurred with Hume that we cannot acquire the conception of causality from observing the conjunction of events in the world, but he did not think that it was a pure concept of the understanding. Instead, Cassirer argued that this concept stems from the ability to use tools – he gives the examples of wielding an ax or hammer.¹³ The concept of causality

⁸ Peirce: *New Elements of Mathematics*, ed. by Carolyn Eisele (The Hague/Paris: Mouton and Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1976), 4 volumes.

⁹ Personal communication from Ruth Barcan Marcus.

¹⁰ Cassirer: *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (1910), *Gesammelte Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe, 25 vols., ed. by Birgit Recki (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1998ff.), vol. 6, ed. Reinhold Schmücker (2003), p. 205: “Der Gegenstand ist das, als was er sich uns allein gibt: eine Summe tatsächlicher und Wirkungsweisen.” This edition is hereafter cited as “ECW” with the volume number.

¹¹ Cassirer: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2: *Mythic Thought*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 157.

¹² Cassirer spoke favorably of Pragmatism even in his first book, *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*, and in later years he reiterates his fundamental agreement with Dewey. See ‘Seminar on Symbolism and Philosophy of Language’ (1941/1942), in *Zur philosophischen Anthropologie*, ed. by Gerald Hartung and Herbert Kopp-Oberstebriink, *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, 20 vols., ed. by Klaus Christian Köhnke, John Michael Krois, and Oswald Schwemmer (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag), vol. 6, in press. This edition is hereafter cited as “ECN” with the volume number.

¹³ See Cassirer, ‘Form und Technik’, in ECW 17: *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften (1927–1931)*, ed. by Tobias Bergen, pp. 139–183.

does not derive simply from the feeling or observation of our actions, but from regarding the tools we use as impersonal “institutions” (Verrichtungen). Not from looking at things happen in nature, but from making them happen through tools and then regarding the action of the tools objectively: that is the source of the concept of cause and effect for Cassirer. Cassirer published this interventionist theory of causality in 1930.¹⁴ This is a kind of pragmatic theory, and it is definitely not orthodox Kantianism – unless we follow Peirce here, who declared: “Kant (whom I *more* than admire) is nothing but a somewhat confused pragmatist”.¹⁵

In Cassirer’s early book *Substance and Function* (*Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*, 1910) the concept of substance, Aristotle’s most important logical category, gets replaced by the least important of Aristotle’s categories: relation. Peirce reformed logic the same way. Peirce called the category of substance the “Nantucket of thought,” something provincial, and of interest only because of its everyday practicality in language but hopelessly inadequate as the basis of logic, and out of place in Modern science. That also fairly well outlines the argument of Cassirer’s book *Substance and Function*.

The most Kantian aspect of Peirce’s philosophizing was his attempt to establish a new list of categories. One of Peirce’s two most important papers (this was his own evaluation¹⁶) had the title ‘On a New List of Categories;’ the other was ‘Some Consequences of Four Incapacities,’ to which I’ll return. The ‘New list of Categories’ paper sought to justify a list of categories that reduced Kant’s deduction of 12 categories to three. But Peirce soon let this Kantian project drop, and in later years he turned instead to what he called ‘phenomenology’ in order to justify his three categories. The ‘new list’ paper took its starting point from an investigation of the subject-predicate relation in a proposition, rather than examining transcendental consciousness as Kant did. But phenomenology can start anywhere and with anything, as its name implies.

No consideration of Charles Peirce’s philosophy can avoid his three categories: firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Peirce employed them to explicate every possible question, and they have such prominence in all of his writing that even he sometimes wondered about their ubiquity. He called this ubiquity

¹⁴ See Cassirer, ‘Form und Technik’, in ECW 17, pp. 159–161.

¹⁵ Peirce, *Collected Papers* (5.525).

¹⁶ Peirce, *Collected Papers* (8.12).

“triadomaný”¹⁷ – the exaggerated tendency to see triads everywhere. Peirce sought to criticize his three categories, claiming that there are three reasons to harbor skepticism about the prevalence of the three categories. These are the suspicion that (1) this is simply a personal idiosyncrasy, (2) a matter of compulsion, and (3) unrealistic and incapable of explanation. These three possibilities for scepticism are of course themselves examples of the categories. In other words, even to be sceptical about these categories demands that you presuppose them. These three grounds for scepticism are instances of (1st) something strictly qualitative (a monad) viz. personal idiosyncrasy, (2nd) a matter of brute opposition (a dyad) viz. compulsion, and (3rd) the reference to regularity and understandability refers to the linking of events, and so having a triad and continuity.

Peirce’s three “categories” are not simply elementary aspects of cognition, but as he puts it the “features that are common to whatever is *experienced* or might conceivably be experienced or become an object of study in any way direct or indirect.” The task of Phenomenology, for Peirce is to establish what these common features are. He described phenomenology as: “a science that [...] just contemplates phenomena as they are, simply opens its eyes and describes what it sees; not what it sees in the real as distinguished from any figment – not regarding any such dichotomy – but simply describing the object, as a phenomenon, and stating what it finds in all phenomena alike”.¹⁸

Cassirer too developed a phenomenology whose sole task was to establish the most fundamental aspects of reality in general. These he called, appropriately, *Basisphänomene*, basis phenomena. This doctrine is unknown because Cassirer’s writings on the subject, written in the late 1930s and early 1940s have only recently become available. So far, three (ECN 1, 2, 3) of the six volumes containing Cassirer’s writings on this doctrine have appeared. All of it was written in Sweden between 1936 and 1941. The basis phenomenon doctrine had the same importance for Cassirer as Peirce’s categories had for him, and it is no exaggeration to say that when all of these texts are available, it will show that the most important years in Cassirer’s life as a philosopher were neither those he spent in Germany nor his final 4 years in America, but his 6 years in Gothenburg.

Cassirer often used the German pronouns for the first, second, and third person (“Ich – Du – Es”) to explicate the Basisphänomene. That is equivalent

¹⁷ Peirce, ‘Triadomaný’, in *Collected Papers* (1.568–572).

¹⁸ These citations are from *Collected Papers* (5.37).

to Peirce's earliest explications of his three categories, for which he used the English pronouns "I – You – It". Cassirer sometimes refers to the basis phenomena as "feeling, action, and the world" and by other designations. As with Peirce, they reappear in different guises in different contexts. Whereas Cassirer's *Philosophy of symbolic forms* transformed Kantianism into a philosophy of inter-subjective media, his phenomenology of Basis phenomena was no longer Kantian at all. It did not permit raising Kant's transcendental question of the "conditions of the possibility" of the phenomena at hand – for if such a question could be raised about them, then we would, by definition, not be talking about *basis* phenomena after all. The *Basisphänomene* doctrine was a "realism," for it was concerned with phenomena as real processes, not our words or thoughts about them. Cassirer is explicit about the reality of the *Basisphänomene*: for he stated: "They are 'prior' to all thought and inference and are the basis of both".¹⁹

Like Peirce, Cassirer did not become a phenomenologist in the usual sense of the word. He distanced himself explicitly from Husserl,²⁰ who as a follower of Descartes granted subjectivity the main role in philosophy. With his phenomenology, Cassirer wanted neither to create a new kind of philosophical science nor a first philosophy outfitted with special methods as Husserl did, nor did he conceive phenomenology as Heidegger did, with the aim of establishing a philosophy of existence in opposition to empirical natural or cultural sciences. Cassirer treated phenomenology the same way as Peirce did, as the doctrine of the most general, irreducibly different kinds of phenomena.

In this respect, Peirce's phenomenology of the three categories and Cassirer's doctrine of the *Basisphänomene* are the same. Cassirer's *Basisphänomene* doctrine formulated what everybody was familiar with, but which was incapable of explanation because explanations always presuppose them. Cassirer did not return to traditional realism (going back to Aristotle) and take these phenomena to be kinds of things or – to use the metaphysical term – *substances*. When Cassirer refers to Ich – Du – Es as *Basisphänomene* he has not forgotten that

¹⁹ See Cassirer, 'Über Basisphänomene', in *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, ECN 1, ed. by John Michael Krois (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1995), p. 132: "Sie sind 'vor' allem Denken und Schließen, liegen diesem selbst zu Grunde." An English translation of this text appeared as 'On Basis Phenomena', in Cassirer: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Volume 4: *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, ed. by John Michael Krois and Donald P. Verene (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1996), p. 137.

²⁰ ECN 1, 171f.

he spent a large part of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (part 3 in volume 2) showing that terms such as *Seele*, *Persönlichkeit*, *Selbst*, and *Ich* do not refer to anything given. The three basis phenomena are not thinglike presences, for if we attend to phenomena – and not to our words for them – then we cannot take substance as fundamental. As Cassirer once put it: “Life, reality, being, existence are nothing but different terms referring to one and the same fundamental fact. These terms do not describe a fixed, rigid, substantial thing. They are to be understood as names of a process”.²¹

It would be interesting here to show how Peirce’s conception of evolution from chance events, or ‘tychism’ as he calls it, finds a parallel in Cassirer’s concept of form. For Cassirer, form is a temporal concept; it did not mean a timeless entity – morphe – the way it did for Aristotle and Husserl, rather it meant morphology. Cassirer argued that the ancient doctrine of *natura non saltus* was invalid, for both in the sphere of nature and culture: there are jumps.²²

But the most important overlap between Cassirer and Peirce is that they both broke with the most fundamental conception in philosophy, the belief that philosophy is based upon logic; for them “logic” was to be considered as semiotic. “Logic” came from the Greek word for both language and reason, but for semiotic language is only one kind of symbolism among many. Here Cassirer and Peirce were in fundamental agreement. Peirce used the word “semeiotic” in his writings but never in his publications, despite the fact that – as he wrote to Lady Welby – everything he ever studied was for him an example of semeiotic.²³ Cassirer used the term ‘Semiotik’ even in early publications, but he did not adopt it for his own thought until he went to America late in life. Instead, he used terms of his own coinage such as symbolic form and *symbolische Prägnanz*. Terminology is important, but what counts is what Peirce and Cassirer were setting out to do.

²¹ Ernst Cassirer, ‘Language and Art II’ (1942), in *Ernst Cassirer: Symbol, Myth, and Culture. Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935–1945*, ed. by Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 193–194.

²² Cassirer elaborates this claim in his study on ‘The Problem of Form and the Problem of Cause’, in *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, trans. by Steve Loftis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 87–102.

²³ Peirce, letter to Lady Welby of Dec 23, 1908, in *Semiotic and Significs: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*, ed. Charles S. Harwick (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977), p. 85f.

Even in the 1960s philosophers in America still regarded Peirce primarily as the first pragmatist while his theory of signs was considered to be one of many incidentals that concerned him, rather than as the focus of everything else. This situation has now changed, although some Peirce scholars still debate what is most fundamental: the doctrine of categories or semeiotic. This is of course a false reification of both. They cannot be separated except by abstraction from real phenomena.

Cassirer's philosophy was, and still is, misinterpreted, even more than Peirce's was. Cassirer has been taken to be a representative of "Subjekt-Philosophie" like German Idealism. Compare the following statement about Cassirer with Cassirer own statements on this topic. In an essay about Cassirer, Gerd Wolandt says: "For Cassirer a theory of the basic constitution of the Object can only be attained from a theory of the basis constitution of the Subject".²⁴ Cassirer himself writes: "Without the second and third person we do not have the first either – and we cannot isolate the first person even 'in thought', for thoughts must always be thoughts about something".²⁵ He also says: "Knowledge about 'me' is not prior and independent of knowing about 'You' and 'It,' rather all this is only constituted together".²⁶ Or in another place: "There is no consciousness of a me without consciousness of a you and even less is there a self, an 'ipse' (himself) except in the general Medium of cultural forms, which provide the ways in which we are able to become a self".²⁷ For Cassirer's semiotic philosophy intersubjective symbolic forms such as language, social rituals, and the like are essential to the constitution of subjectivity, and these are

²⁴ Gerd Wolandt, 'Cassirers Symbolbegriff und die Grundlegungsproblematik der Geisteswissenschaften', in *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, 18 (1964): 616: "Allein aus der Lehre von der Grundkonstitution des Subjekts ist für Cassirer eine Theorie von der Grundkonstitution des Objekts zu gewinnen".

²⁵ "Ohne die zweite und dritte Person haben wir auch die erste nicht – / und selbst "in Gedanken" können wir die erste Person nicht isolieren/ denn Gedanken müssen eben immer schon Gedanken von Etwas sein". This quotation is from Cassirer, 'Objektivität der Ausdrucksfunktion', in ECN 5: *Zur Kulturphilosophie und zum Problem des Ausdrucks*, ed. by Rüdiger Kramme, in press.

²⁶ "Das Wissen von 'mir' ist nicht vor und unabhängig vom Wissen des 'Du' und 'Es', sondern dies alles konstituiert sich nur miteinander –" This quotation is from Cassirer, 'Objektivität der Ausdrucksfunktion' section 'Zur Relativität der Beziehungssysteme' 5,2), in ECN 5: *Zur Kulturphilosophie und zum Problem des Ausdrucks*, ed. by Rüdiger Kramme, in press.

²⁷ "Denn Ich-Selbst (Solus-ipse) "bin" gar nicht, ohne die Beziehung auf "andere Subjekte"[.] / Es giebt kein Ich-Bewusstsein ohne Du-Bewusstsein / noch weniger giebt [es] ein Selbst, ein "ipse" ausser in dem allgemeinen Medium der Kulturformen, die gerade die Wege zum Selbst sind[.]" This quotation is from Cassirer, 'Objektivität der Ausdrucksfunktion', in ECN 5.

physically embodied in objective processes. Wolandt, like most philosophers of his generation, believed that Cassirer upheld the credo of the Marburg Neo-Kantian school: Nothing is given to thought except thought itself.²⁸ What is more, he believed it himself. With such a presupposition it is no wonder that Cassirer's philosophy was so long misunderstood in post-war Germany.

The most important point of agreement between Cassirer and Peirce was that for them signs and symbols are not appendages to thinking; thinking *is* semiosis. Whenever philosophers discussed signs in the past, e.g., Hobbes, Locke, or Lambert, they treated thoughts – feelings, volitions, ideas – as primary and signs as secondary, as the implements for their expression. Even Heidegger, who called signs “Zeug” or equipment, regarded signs as secondary phenomena. For Peirce and Cassirer signs were first: the *process* that Peirce called semiosis and which Cassirer called “das Symbolische,” “symbolische Formung,” or “symbolische Prägnanz”.

Peirce's masterpieces of philosophy, the 1868 essay pair, ‘Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man’ and its counterpart ‘Some Consequences of Four Incapacities’ were in his own eyes the most heterodox things he ever wrote, which is perhaps why he wrote them in the guise of scholastic disputed questions. But as Derrida noted in *Grammatology*, Peirce's doctrine that “the idea of manifestation is the idea of a sign”²⁹ went a long way towards eliminating the transcendental signified. But Peirce did not go to such lengths, instead, he relocated the real in a process – knowable only in the future.

It took a long time for philosophers to understand the implications of the doctrine that sign processes are primary, and so too Cassirer's most important doctrine, which he called “symbolische Prägnanz,” was not understood for decades. “Symbolic value” would be the best English translation of this term (“pregnant” in the sense of conciseness is not meant, but the opposite). Cassirer's central point is that there is no such thing as intuition, no sensory contents that are not always already instances of a symbolic process. What seems immediately present to us is always more: it always possesses expressive,

²⁸ This conception was central in Hermann Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1914), p. 29: “das Denken selbst ist das Ziel und der Gegenstand seiner Tätigkeit”.

²⁹ See Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 48f., esp. 49: “According to the ‘phaneoscopy’ or ‘phenomenology’ of Peirce, *manifestation* itself does not reveal a presence, it makes a sign”. Peirce actually writes that “the idea of manifestation is the idea of a sign” Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers* (1.346).

representational or significant symbolic value. That was also Peirce's central claim in his 1868 essays; instead of intuitions there is only semiosis. Although he did not know it, Cassirer developed his central argument for a semiotic philosophy the same way that Peirce did in 1868: by criticizing Cartesianism. Both attacked the conceptions of intuitive knowledge, the self-certainty of the thinking subject, and Descartes' dualism of thinking and extended substances.

Descartes claimed that we have immediate intuition of ourselves as a thinking substance. Peirce argued against the logical possibility of having an intuition (which he defined as a premise that is not itself a conclusion). Cassirer's criticism of Descartes' dualism focused upon what Cassirer calls the body-soul (*Leib-Seele*) relation. He summed up what he called "the center of our investigation" with this sentence: "The relation between body and soul represents the prototype and model for a purely symbolic relation, which cannot be converted into a relation between things or into a causal relation".³⁰ In other words, the most immediate experience possible, our own bodily awareness, is really a process of semiosis and not a matter of given substances in interaction. When Descartes spoke of the ego he mistook the basic phenomenon of feeling for a monadic unity, whereas it is really a process that extends over time. Cassirer says that the basic phenomenon of subjectivity "is not even describable in terms of a present. ... I do not experience myself as 'being'". Cassirer argues the same point phenomenologically that Peirce does logically: there is no instantaneous presence, but only a process of coming to be – and this process is both felt and not felt. Insofar as it is felt, it is semiotic (symbolically pregnant), and insofar as it is not felt, it is a dynamic biophysical process.

In recent years Cassirer's philosophy at last has come to be regarded in its own terms, and some have even called it "deconstruction *avant la lettre*",³¹ because it utilized the notion of Sign processes to eliminate dualisms and reifications. By contrast, Husserl's Phenomenology was supposed to lead to intuitions – absolute beginnings for thought. For Peirce and Cassirer there are no absolute beginnings, but semiosis or *symbolische Prägnanz*. Like Peirce,

³⁰ Cassirer: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3: *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, p. 100.

³¹ Barend van Heusen, Jakob von Uexküll and Ernst Cassirer: *Semiotica*, 134 (2001): 275–292, here p. 281. He is referring, e.g., to PSF 4, p. 17. For a study of Cassirer's philosophy in relationship to contemporary French thought, see Steve G. Lofts: *Ernst Cassirer: A "Repetition" of Modernity* (Buffalo: SUNY Press, 2000).

Cassirer did not take this to entail eliminating reality, but its traditional, substantial conception.

Peirce concluded his criticisms of Descartes in his 1868 essays with his famous enigmatic sounding statement that “man is a sign”. That sounds similar to Cassirer’s claim that human bodily awareness is the prototype and model of a symbolic relation. It sounds as though Peirce and Cassirer are closely allied. That is true, but not here, for where their philosophies touch upon anthropological matters, their thought diverges.

(2) How Cassirer and Peirce differ:

Peirce divided semeiotic into 3 divisions: ‘speculative’, meaning ‘theoretical,’ grammar, critic and rhetoric. Peirce is rightly well-known for his work in the first area, which includes his taxonomies of signs. Speculative critic deals with the matter of logical validity and the three types of inference, which included abduction along with induction and deduction. Peirce dealt with the third doctrine least of all, but he claimed that speculative rhetoric was destined to grow into the greatest branch of semiotic of all. Speculative rhetoric examines “how one kind of sign brings forth another”.³² Peirce defined speculative rhetoric as “the science of the essential conditions under which a sign may determine an interpretant sign of itself and of whatever it signifies, or may, as a sign, bring about a physical result”.³³ Peirce was thinking here of speech acts and social processes of all kinds.

Cassirer’s treatment of these three topics is the mirror image of Peirce’s. He deals mostly with the latter point, speculative rhetoric, and relatively little attention is given to the other two. His morphological approach to symbolic processes makes use of a minimal taxonomy of sign types like those that Peirce developed in his speculative grammar.

The best way to contrast Cassirer and Peirce is to consider Peirce’s notion of iconicity. Peirce frequently stated that iconicity is based upon similarity or “likeness” (2.279). Peirce claimed that icons do not assert, but presented possibilities. Of course, icons are often, rhetorically speaking, imperatives: they exclaim: “Look here!” They have what Peirce later called emotional interpretants.

³² ‘Ideas, Stray or Stolen, about Scientific Writing’ (1904), *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. by The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), vol. 2, (1893–1913), pp. 326–327.

³³ *Ibid.*

Cassirer's various triadic distinctions for describing different kinds of sign processes seem to parallel Peirce's. The most important of these is the division between *Ausdruck*, *Darstellung* and *reine Bedeutung*, usually translated: Expression, Representation, and pure significance. These relate to Peirce's categories of 1stness, 2ndness and 3rdness, but they are not equivalent to any of his semiotic distinctions. Cassirer's second type of symbolic function generalizes Bühler's notion of the *Darstellungsfunktion* of language (from whom he borrowed the term), and the 3rd was taken from discussions in metamathematics, the idea being that the meaning of signs in formal systems may be purely relational and not possess any further semantic meaning. Cassirer's innovation lay in his doctrine of the expressive function of symbolism. This is a kind of natural symbolism, but it is not comparable with what Grice called a natural meaning or a natural sign – indices such as a dog's shiny coat standing for health or smoke for fire. It is more like Peirce's iconicity. Cassirer claims that what philosophers once called secondary qualities and now call "qualia" (the sense of touch such as the feeling of roughness, the sensations of heat or colors) and what are sometimes called tertiary qualities (emotional feelings such as perceiving a sombre mood in the evening landscape) are all instances of the expressive function of symbolism. In other words, what philosophers previously called "the aesthetic sphere" is now taken to be the most fundamental symbolic sphere.

Peirce came to aesthetics very late in his career and his writings on the topic make up only a small part of his work. The aesthetic sphere is the sphere of qualitative Individuality. Peirce once said: "it is the belief men *betray* and not that which they *parade* which has to be studied".³⁴ Peirce betrayed his assessment of qualitative individuality when, as we heard before, he called it the sphere of "personal idiosyncrasy". Generality – not individuality – was Peirce's deepest concern, and when he developed his aesthetics at the end of his life, his concern was to establish the aesthetic ideal of "the admirable," namely: "concrete reasonableness," a logician's notion of beauty – the habit of taking on habits and so acquiring generality. With Cassirer the opposite is true; he began as a student of literature, and even after he took up philosophy the aesthetic sphere dominated his interests from the beginning. Cassirer focused upon individuality – this is what drew him early to work on Leibniz, the philosopher for whom there was such a thing as "individual substances". This is why Cassirer read Goethe more than any other writer, everyday for 40 years, he said in his Goetheburg Goethe-Lectures.

³⁴ Peirce, 'Issues of Pragmatism' (1905), in *Collected Papers* (5.444 n).

Cassirer's focus upon individuality and emotional content did not center upon aesthetics in the sense of a theory of art. Instead, he concentrated upon a topic for which we find no overlap with Peirce, namely what Cassirer termed "mythic thought". For Cassirer, mythic thought is a way of perceiving, of thinking (classifying), and a form of life – a type of social existence involving specific kinds of practices, especially rituals, the use of images, and types of classification based upon social beliefs rather than scientific research. Mythic thought depends everywhere upon the expressive function of symbolism. Cassirer's work on myth was not an appendage to the philosophy of symbolic forms, but its initial focus, for all the other symbolic forms developed from this center in different directions, with art and science as polar opposites, the one focusing upon individuality and the other upon generality. Since I cannot enter into a comparison of the architectonic of Cassirer's and Peirce's philosophies, I will just focus on the point of greatest difference: the symbolic process that pervades mythic thought, the "Ausdrucksfunktion" or expressive function of symbolism.

Take this quote from Cassirer: "The mythical feeling of spatiality proceeds everywhere upon the basis of the opposition of day and night, of radiance and darkness".³⁵ Levi-Strauss would focus here upon the binary opposition between radiance and darkness, but Cassirer focused upon their expressivity. Unlike Lévi-Strauss, Peirce did not model semiotics upon linguistics;³⁶ he went back to the tradition of Greek medicine and the interpretation of symptoms for his model of semiosis. Yet Peirce's semiotic program for philosophy nevertheless gives little attention to the kind of expressive phenomena that pervade mythic thought, such as ritual, despite the centrality of habit in Peirce's philosophy.

The strong emotionality characteristic of ritual serves to focus attention. Rituals divide the world up dramatically into areas without relying upon binary distinctions. Here is an example that Cassirer employs from an Australian tribe. Instead of utilizing the four cardinal directions of our compass, landmarks identified with different tribes aid in marking out directions. These directions are associated with different groups – "people of the Sun," of the "Hot Winds," of the "white Cacodus," and the like.³⁷ Directions indicate the ways in which

³⁵ Cassirer: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2: *Mythic Thought*, p. 96.

³⁶ See Peirce's criticism of language in his letter to Lady Welby of Nov 20, 1904, *Semiotic and Significs*, p. 40: "language fails here. It insists on keeping us in the toils of Secondness – either this or that: your money or your life! Now the either-or is an admirable servant but it is an impossible master. So is language."

³⁷ Australian aborigines distinguish among totem classes such as "people of the sun," "people of

the dead were to be buried according to their totem membership. Instead of measuring space by means of an objective scale, it was grasped in terms of the action of burial rituals. Examples such as this led Cassirer to the conclusion that in mythic thought, the human body offered the ‘preferred system of relationships’, around which everything was organized.³⁸ For example, he cites a medieval source according to which the body of Adam was composed of earth (his flesh), stones (his bones), the sea (his blood), plants (his hair) and clouds (his thoughts).³⁹ A world understood this way through images seems arbitrary. Lévi-Strauss famously criticized ritual as a mode of symbolizing because of this. It led to “fragmentation” – due to a “lack of interest in generality.”⁴⁰ According to the structuralist thinking, images are anarchistic, as are gestures and movements of the body. Anybody can point at anything with their finger, and in images the same sort of anarchy also seems to exist (unless, of course, a set of images can be shown to also follow binary logic, as Levi-Strauss showed in his book on Kwakwilt masks⁴¹). But pictures, like gestures, attract attention. Early drawings may not be exact or well formed but they are concentrated in their expressive content. Even an optically diffuse image can be very expressive. The general mood of a scene can seem threatening or festive, eerie or uplifting. This too is a kind of meaning. However, Levi-Strauss and even Peirce were not interested in the generality of expressive phenomena but in binary oppositions or in processes of habit-taking.

the white Kakadus,” “people of the hot winds,” etc. An anthropologist fixed these directions in a diagram with the help of a compass, while the natives explained their space to him. But for these natives these spaces were continuous rather than exactly differentiated, hence directions such as “Wartwut but also partly Moiwiluk” (Nos. 6 and 7). See Cassirer, ‘Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken’ (1922), in ECW 16: *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften (1922–1926)*, ed. by Julia Clemens, pp. 3–73; quote from p. 63.

³⁸ Cassirer, ‘Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken’ (1922), in ECW 16. p. 45; “Der menschliche Körper und seine einzelnen Gliedmaßen erscheinen gleichsam als ein ‘bevorzugtes Bezugssystem’, auf das die Gliederung des Gesamtraumes und all dessen, was in ihm enthalten ist, zurückgeführt wird” (The human body and its particular parts offers a kind of ‘preferred system of relationships,’ upon the basis of which the differentiation of space as a whole, and everything within it, can be referred to).

³⁹ Cassirer, ‘Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken’ (1922), in ECW 16, p. 46.

⁴⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss: *The Naked Man*, Introduction to a Science of Mythology, vol. 4 (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 672: “It has no concern for the general.” The criticism of ritual runs from pp. 668–684.

⁴¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss: *The Way of the Masks*, translated from the French by Sylvia Modelski (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

Cassirer began his investigations of symbolism with the examination of feeling. The sense of touch seems to be the most direct kind of sensation we possess and to involve no kind of symbolism. The feeling we sense when touching a windowpane is a concrete experience: hard, smooth, and cold. But Cassirer pointed out that if we consider the most basic *qualities* of touch – qualities such as “hard” and “soft,” “rough” and “smooth” – we must grant that these arise only through motion, that is by touching, so if the sensation of touch were limited to a single momentary instant, within that instant *these* qualities could no longer be found as data.⁴² The coldness we feel contrasts with what we felt before, and this too depends upon the action of touching. These examples of the expressive symbolic values in perception were the focus of Cassirer’s work – and for Susanne Langer who took her point of departure from Cassirer.

By contrast, Peirce’s conception of an icon did not focus upon expression or feeling. Although iconicity was not *defined* in terms of visuality, we find that even when Peirce gave non-visual examples of iconicity, such a hearing music, he saw iconicity in terms of likenesses, namely “the sentiment excited by a piece of music considered as representing what the composer intended”.⁴³

Peirce had difficulties with his category of firstness, for it was inconceivable without the other two categories, and this problem carried over into his discussion of iconicity. Peirce’s concern with logic did not permit him to acknowledge the importance of the firstness of thirdness, only the thirdness of firstness. The firstness of thirdness is qualitative individuality. Let me illustrate this with an example from Peirce’s Cambridge Conference lectures⁴⁴ – a line on the blackboard. Here is a line:



This line involves all three categories: the line has borders which separate it from the blackboard – that is its secondness – and there is something more general than the line itself, the blackboard upon which it is written, which

⁴² See Cassirer: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 178.

⁴³ Peirce, letter to Lady Welby, October 12, 1904, *Semiotic and Significs*, p. 33.

⁴⁴ See Peirce, *Reasoning and the Logic of Things: The Cambridge Conference lectures of 1898*, ed. by Kenneth Laine Ketner with an Introduction by Kenneth Laine Ketner and Hilary Putnam (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), esp. pp. 261–263.

provides its continuity or 3rdness. The line itself is qualitatively what it is: white chalk color or (here) black ink.

But while *this* specific line looks quiet, *another* looks agitated:



Materially, it is the same as the other line (chalk or ink), so its contrast with the background is the same as the other line's. Yet its firstness is different. It is a continuous line too, there is no break in it. But the firstness of this thirdness is different. Its qualitative individuality is different.

Peirce once wrote that “when we study the great principle of continuity ... it will appear that individualism and falsity are one and the same. Meantime, we know that man is not whole as long as he is single, that he is essentially a possible member of society. Especially, one man's experience is nothing, if it stands alone. If he sees what others cannot, we call it hallucination. It is not ‘my’ experience, but ‘our’ experience that has to be thought of: and this ‘us’ has indefinite possibilities”.⁴⁵

Cassirer could never have written that. Perhaps instead of ‘hallucination,’ he would have said: “If he sees what others cannot, we call it art”. Of course, even the artist masters something general and utilizes it in a personal way: namely the *imaginative processes* exemplified socially in mythical thought and privately in dreams. Cassirer termed “mythic thought” a symbolic form, a way of having a world, but it is really the oldest part of a family of different kinds of semiosis that depend upon the expressive function of symbolism. Cassirer explicated his conception of expressive symbolism in reference to a variety of other topics including: aphasia (negatively as prosopagnosia), child psychology, psychology of emotion, the perception of qualia, metaphor, music, physiognomic perception, synesthesia, and more. The most systematic published

⁴⁵ Peirce, ‘How to make our Ideas Clear’, in *Collected Papers* (5.402 footnote 2, added in 1893): “When we come to study the great principle of continuity and see how all is fluid and every point directly partakes the being of every other, it will appear that individualism and falsity are one and the same. Meantime, we know that man is not whole as long as he is single, that he is essentially a possible member of society. Especially, one man's experience is nothing, if it stands alone. If he sees what others cannot, we call it hallucination. It is not ‘my’ experience, but ‘our’ experience that has to be thought of; and this ‘us’ has indefinite possibilities.”

discussion is found in the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. These topics are rarely mentioned by Peirce, but for Cassirer the expressive function of symbolism is ultimately the basis of all semiotic processes, which is why he sought different approaches to its examination.

When Cassirer speaks of the primacy of the perception of the image over the thing, he really means the primacy of expression – the “fundamental and primary stratum of perception”.⁴⁶ When we describe fleeting and vaguely defined expressive qualities as “light or dark, warm or cold, rough or smooth” we abstract from their emotional tone – that they feel “familiar, sheltering, and protective” or the opposite – “inaccessible, terrifying, and gruesome”.⁴⁷ The study of expression shows that this “moodiness” typical of mythic thought and of psychosis, is what artists are able to utilize in order to create works that exhibit their awareness of the volatility of emotionality. All this is very far from Peirce’s concerns, but it was the focal point of Cassirer’s interest. Expressive meaning was for him the way to understand qualitative individuality – what Peirce regarded as idiosyncrasy. That is how Cassirer and Peirce differ.

(3) Why is the difference between Peirce's and Cassirer's programs important?

Why is it important to understand qualitative individuality? Cassirer and Peirce had many reasons for studying semiotic, but they were fundamentally thinkers in the tradition of systematic philosophy for whom Kant and Hegel and the great systematic philosophers of the past were a constant part of their work. Their semiotic programs were intended to reform systematic philosophy. The great philosophical advancement of semiotics was that unlike logic in the traditional sense, it was essentially a theory of media: it brought idealistic philosophy back down to earth while avoiding psychologism – the confusion of structural or logical processes such as inference with psychological processes. Peirce once wrote to Lady Welby: “I define a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former. My insertion of ‘upon a person’ is a sop to Cerberus, because I

⁴⁶ Cassirer: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, p. 73.

⁴⁷ Cassirer: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, pp. 73 and 90.

despair of making my own broader conception understood”.⁴⁸ What he meant was, Semiosis is not a matter of psychology, even though human thought is semiosis. Cultural forms, Cassirer knew, are always embodied and so symbolic processes have effects “upon a person”. In all of this we are dealing with something singular, yet without forfeiting generality.

Peirce’s late work was devoted to the normative sciences as he called them, with aesthetics as the capstone. But Peirce’s conception of the aesthetic as the concrete reasonableness of habit-taking betrayed a deeply Hegelian stripe in his conception of philosophy. Peirce and Cassirer both took feeling to be the basis of mind (see Peirce’s ‘The Law of Mind’), but the generality of feeling was Peirce’s interest, and not its aesthetic manifestation as qualitative individuality.

Cassirer’s focus upon individuality led him to investigate expressive symbolism and its manifestation in what he called mythical thought. For Cassirer it is impossible to divorce the emotional qualities of perception because of the body. His approach to semiotics, beginning with the body-soul relationship, was actually a kind of biosemiotics. Cassirer’s interest in philosophical anthropology and expressive symbolism showed that at this juncture he had managed to leave German Idealism behind him, even more than Peirce did.

This is why the difference between Cassirer’s program and Peirce’s is important: Cassirer’s permits applying semiotic to individual phenomena that escaped Peirce’s purview. Cassirer’s theory of expressive symbolism was never completely worked out, but the program is there. It adds to the program that Peirce completed, and philosophy needs them both if it is to get beyond symbolisms and come to understand the indexical and iconic forms of meaning that have eluded it ever since logic was declared to be its sole concern.

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⁴⁸ Peirce, Letter to Lady Welby, December 23, 1908, *Semiotic and Signific*, p. 80f.