

‘A passion can only be overcome by a stronger passion’: Philosophical Anthropology before and after Ernst Cassirer

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‘Philosophical anthropology’ was initiated in the late 1920s as an alternative to abstract philosophical definitions of human nature (‘animal rationale’) and to the exclusively empirical, physical study of anthropology. Philosophical anthropology focused upon what it meant to be a human being. Its founders concentrated upon the situated existence of human beings and their ability to think beyond and to deny even what was actually vitally important to them. For Cassirer, these efforts remained too abstract because they failed to take the breadth of human cultural activity into account. The decisive feature of human life is neither reason nor language. These are derivative from symbolism, not the other way around. Human beings are best described as ‘animal symbolicum’. The error of earlier anthropological conceptions was not that they venerated reason, but that they ignored the body and so separated reason from emotion. The concept of symbolism, as Cassirer conceived it, overcame this dualism. His philosophical anthropology has been vindicated today in many areas of empirical research, but replacing the concept of ‘reason’ with that of ‘symbolism’ was no minor revision to the Western philosophical tradition, and the amplification and application of this new outlook has barely begun.

Ernst Cassirer was one of the central figures in German cultural life until the National Socialists came to power. Cassirer’s work as a philosopher brought him into contact with diverse fields including physics, literature, and art history. He was friends with Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann, and Erwin Panofsky and, like them, he too left Germany after Hitler was named chancellor. In recent decades Cassirer’s work as a philosopher has enjoyed a renaissance, especially in

Germany; however, my topic concerns an area of his thought that is not well known: his philosophical anthropology.

The term ‘philosophical anthropology’ originated in Germany in the 1920s. Almost simultaneously and unknown to one another, Max Scheler and Helmut Plessner both published studies on what they called ‘philosophische Anthropologie’.^{1,2} Instead of seeking to define ‘human nature’ objectively in terms of some timeless metaphysical ‘essence’, the way earlier philosophers had done, or describing humans in naturalistic, empirical terms the way physical anthropologists and psychologists do, they began with the question of what it is *to be* a human being. Plessner spoke of the ‘eccentric positionality’ of humans. By this he called attention to two facts: first, that humans, as living things, are ‘positioned.’ They have a world, whereas physical things have no world, but are just part of nature. Second, humans are not only positioned in their world, they are also beyond it; they experience their experiencing. Scheler’s philosophical anthropology was similar to Plessner’s. For Scheler, the distinguishing feature of human beings is that their ‘mind’ or ‘Geist,’ is not simply able to look beyond the human situation, but it is able to turn against the sphere of life. In Scheler’s philosophical anthropology the defining feature of human existence is the fact that the human mind, as he put it, is able to ‘say “no” ’ to organic reality. Humans are able to deny their own natural inclinations, and this gives them their unique place. Philosophical anthropology shifted the focus typical of Modern philosophy from the abstract notion of ‘mind’ to embodied human beings, positioned in a world in a particular place and time.

In 1928, the same year that Plessner published his study of philosophical anthropology, Cassirer completed a substantial text he entitled ‘The Problem of the Symbol as the fundamental problem of philosophical Anthropology’ which wasn’t published until 1995 (English translation 1996). Until then, Cassirer’s philosophical anthropology was known only through his late book *An Essay on Man*, which appeared in America in 1944. His text from 1928 was one of several large unpublished manuscripts he wrote on the topic of philosophical anthropology. In Gothenburg he delivered a year long set of lectures on philosophical anthropology in 1939 and 1940³ and in 1941, in America, he wrote a manuscript entitled ‘Philosophical Anthropology’ from which he later derived the text of the more popular *An Essay on Man*. The Gothenburg lectures and the book on Philosophical Anthropology have in the meantime been reassembled from the manuscripts and both will soon appear in print for the first time.⁴

Cassirer wanted to publish these writings, but circumstances did not permit it. Publication of the 1928 manuscript was delayed when Cassirer became rector of the University of Hamburg, and not long thereafter Hitler assumed power. Less than six weeks later Cassirer had left Germany and never lived there again. In the ensuing years his ability to see his work through to publication was limited and

in some cases impossible.⁵ He did, however, publish an essay on philosophical anthropology before leaving Germany in which he criticized Scheler.⁷ He argued that Scheler's conceptions of mind and life treated them as if they were different objects, whereas in reality 'mind' is only a name for a process that emerges within the process of life; it is not an alien substance. Instead of 'mind,' Cassirer claimed that *symbolism* is the fundamental problem of philosophical anthropology. Symbolism is what really differentiates humans from animals. Humans use vocal sounds not only to warn or gesture as animals do, but to say things to one another about the world and about themselves, to tell stories, make promises, and much more. Scheler focused upon the fact that humans could 'say "no"', but the amazing thing is they can *say* anything at all. That sets human apart. Eccentric positionality, standing outside the situation in which humans find themselves is not just 'given' in the way Plessner described it, rather it is a function of humans' ability to distance themselves from their position in the world by means of symbolic representation, especially the ability to represent what is not, but was, or could be, or might have been (Ref. 8, Part I). Philosophical anthropology therefore requires the investigation of 'culture' in the cultural anthropologist's sense of the word: social activity taken as a form of symbolic interaction. Symbolic activities are what set humans apart as a species, but these include more than language and they involve the emotions as well as the intellect.

Not everyone everywhere acts according to what we would term 'reason', but people everywhere do participate in rituals, have oral narratives and some kinds of imagery. The ancient definition of human beings as 'animal rationale', therefore was faulty, and Cassirer revised it. His definition was 'animal symbolicum', for symbolism is the basis of reason, not the other way around.

By the time that Cassirer had finished working out his philosophical anthropology, he had to do more than rethink the traditional philosophical conceptions of 'reason' or 'mind', he also had to reinterpret the relationship between reason and the emotions. An indication of this is his claim: 'A passion can only be overcome by a stronger passion'.⁶ Taken at face value, that sounds like exciting but unwise advice. We normally think of passions in the literal sense of the word as something that we endure passively, they overwhelm us and are beyond our control. This claim seems to suggest that in order to overcome a passion we must wait for an even stronger one to come along to liberate us from the first. That is not what Cassirer meant, but in order to explain what he did mean, it will be necessary first to say more about symbolism and anthropology, before coming back to emotion.

Symbolism

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 window-pane is a concrete experience: hard, smooth, and cold. Philosophers used to call such feelings ‘secondary qualities’ in contrast to ‘primary’ or measurable qualities, such as length, or temperature taken as molecular motion as determined by a thermometer. But Cassirer pointed out that if we consider the most basic *qualities* of touch – *hard* and *soft*, *rough* and *smooth* – we must grant that these only arise through motion, that is, in the process of touching. If the sensation of touch were limited to a single instantaneous moment, then within that instant *these* qualities could no longer be found as data (Ref. 11, p. 178). Roughness must be felt in the process of touching, just as the feeling of coldness contrasts with what we felt before. These are not ‘simple sensations,’ they emerge from a process and exhibit a kind of meaning. Cassirer dropped the term ‘secondary qualities’ as incorrect because from a phenomenological perspective they are actually basic, and he referred to them instead as examples of what he called the perception of ‘expression.’^{11,12} Today, philosophers no longer speak about secondary qualities, but simply of *qualia*. But this neutral term, like such words as ‘blue’ or ‘pain’, pass over what Cassirer took to be the most important feature of such phenomena, their expressive character, which he claimed is a fundamental kind of symbolic value. He called this the *symbolic pregnance* of perception. This is not a cultural phenomenon, but a kind of natural symbolism that is not consciously controlled. Cassirer took this claim to its logical conclusion, and held that our own bodily awareness arises in the same way as the *sensation of roughness* does. Even our own bodily awareness, what we feel or sense within us or without, is ‘symbolically pregnant’ with ‘expressive meaning’. He concluded that what philosophers usually call the body-soul (Leib-Seele) relation is actually ‘the prototype and model’ of symbolic relationships (Ref. 11, p. 100). This is an original, and very untraditional conception of symbolism.

This new conception was intended to supplement and complete the traditional conceptions of symbolization as referential or purely significative. In order to establish his theory, Cassirer had to re-examine these conceptions as well. It was a large task and so was the result: a three-volume, 1162 page work called *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Despite its size, it was, in Cassirer’s eyes, unfinished. He intended to publish a further, concluding volume that was supposed to include among other things a text on ‘The Problem of the Symbol as the Basic Problem of Philosophical Anthropology.’

Anthropology

The customary distinction between physical and cultural anthropology separates the biological study of human beings from ethnology or what anthropologists

since E. B. Taylor have called ‘culture’ – the practices and products that make up human worlds. Cassirer’s philosophical anthropology was supposed to re-integrate these biological and cultural perspectives. This is most evident in the largest section of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which bears the title ‘the pathology of symbolic consciousness’. It deals with impairments to perception and thought due to injuries to the brain, including optical and tactile agnosia, apraxia, and aphasia. Cassirer claimed that all these inabilities were variations on a single theme, the restriction of the capacity to understand symbolism. According to Cassirer, the ability to use signs and symbols was not only necessary for thought, even perception and feeling depended upon it (Ref. 11, pp. 209–210, 227). This committed him to the claim that a person could be in possession of fully functional sense organs and to have what philosophers called ‘sensations’ and yet not be able to perceive anything at all, if the ability to understand symbolic meaning was impaired. This view put Cassirer outside strictly idealistic philosophy, for his recourse to the discussion of the brain, neurology, and the body was incompatible with any claims about the immanence of consciousness.

Aphasia had been a topic among philosophers before. In the year that Cassirer was born, 1874, there was a debate in Berlin about the nature and causes of aphasia in which philosophers, psychologists and linguists stood in opposition to physicians and physiologists. The former group preferred to treat aphasia in reference to ‘the mind’ while the latter group preferred to consider aphasia in reference to specific areas of the brain. With the debate at a standstill, a member of the medical faction asked whether the psychologists and philosophers might not actually come to see a patient with aphasia in the hospital, and even asked the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey to do so. Dilthey refused, explaining that a novice could not promote science by being confronted with a situation that he was not able to deal with (Ref. 14, pp. 279–288).

A half century later, prefatory to writing his study of the pathology of symbolic consciousness, Cassirer not only went to see a patient with aphasia, but in the company of the neurologist Kurt Goldstein he repeatedly visited a number of patients in the Frankfurt clinic for soldiers with brain damage from wounds in the first world war, and in Hamburg, he visited patients in Heinrich Emden’s neurological ward at the Barmbeck hospital. He steeped himself in the medical literature and when he visited England in 1927 to lecture he sought out Henry Head, the great English pioneer in aphasia research.⁷

Cassirer sided neither with the mentalists nor the locationalists. For Cassirer, ‘the mind’ (Geist) wasn’t some kind of entity, but ‘a function’¹⁷ of the whole organism – the brain and the body, acting in its environment.⁵ The word ‘environment’ here translates the German ‘Umwelt’, or ‘surrounding world’. Cassirer’s frequent use of the word *Umwelt* in his philosophical anthropology was due to the influence of a new colleague at the University of Hamburg, the biologist

Jakob von Uexküll. In 1926 Uexküll became the director of the Institute for Umweltforschung in Hamburg, and Cassirer became a frequent visitor to the institute and Uexküll's friend. By 1928, Cassirer was making extensive use of Uexküll's biological theories in his text on 'The Problem of the Symbol as the fundamental problem of philosophical anthropology.' According to Uexküll, the *anatomy* of the organism had to be conceived in terms of its *Bauplan* or 'organization', which determined its particular *Umwelt* or surrounding world. This world was a correlate of the organism's particular anatomy. That meant that each organism lives in its own particular world or niche because of the nature of its anatomy – its perceptive organs, means of feeding and movement, etc – so that the phenomena familiar to one species are unknown to another. As Uexküll once put it, in the world of the fly we find only 'fly things', in the world of a sea urchin we find only 'sea urchin things'. Uexküll's theories, which were neglected for a time, are enjoying a renaissance today among biologists and cognitive scientists.¹⁸

Cassirer was struck by the parallels and even more by the differences between Uexküll's conception of animals' worlds and the symbolic worlds of humans. Uexküll's theoretical biology of *Umwelten* provided the bridge that was needed to conjoin cultural symbolism with physical anthropology and biology. In addition to the biological *Umwelt* of the human anatomy, humans are able to inhabit worlds of symbolic memory, imagination, and knowledge that are unknown in the animal kingdom. Cassirer's incorporation of Uexküll's biological thought into his philosophical anthropology turned out, however, to be only a first step in a new development.

The most surprising discovery among Cassirer's unpublished manuscripts from his years in Sweden was that they expounded a doctrine that he had always presupposed yet never explicated. This doctrine fits with Uexküll's theoretical biology but goes far beyond it in its philosophical finality. Cassirer called it the doctrine of the *Basisphänomene* or 'basis phenomena'. The purpose of this phenomenological doctrine was to make explicit the fundamental presuppositions of philosophy. Cassirer claimed that there are three basic phenomena, that is, independent and irreducible realities. He referred to them sometimes by the words Life, Action, and the World or simply by the pronouns I, Thou, It. He meant the phenomena, not the words. As he put it: 'Knowledge about "me" is not prior and independent of knowing about "You" and "It", rather, all this is only constituted together.'²⁰

This was a kind of 'realism',²³ but it was not a return to traditional realism (going back to Aristotle), for the basic phenomena are not kinds of things or *substances*, but processes.^{24,25} The phenomenon of the 'I' or 'Life' did not mean the self-identical 'thinking subject' of idealistic philosophy, but the process of feeling.²⁵

This doctrine of basic phenomena provided the framework for Cassirer's philosophical anthropology. It made its assumptions explicit: the existence of organisms living in a world. Cassirer had appealed to a such a doctrine in the 1920s, but he did not make it explicit until the late 1930s²⁷ after he moved to Sweden. Here he was forced to make his position clear because of the charges of subjectivism that had been levelled at him repeatedly by the Uppsala philosophers Hägerström, Marc-Wogau, and Hedenius.²⁹ With his doctrine of basic phenomena, it was no longer possible to believe that Cassirer upheld a subjectivistic philosophy. Nonetheless, even though Cassirer's doctrine of basic phenomena was a realism, it was not naive realism. The basic phenomena were processes and not things. Cassirer wanted it both ways, to be a realist and to deny that phenomena are simply given. The point of his study of the Pathology of symbolic consciousness was to show that what we take for granted as immediate givens are not really immediate, but depend upon symbolic processes, and the proof of this lay in the fact that it was possible to lose touch with these basic phenomena.

Regarded naively, the perception of the other – a Thou – as opposed to the perception of things – an 'It' – seems to be a simple matter of seeing obvious differences, but for Cassirer to perceive a 'Thou' required a different kind of symbolic understanding from the representative function involved in perceiving things. In neither case is perception simply a matter of sensation. One of Goldstein's patients, Cassirer noted, lacked the capacity to recognize people but saw them as objects. This patient was forced to use logic in order to distinguish people from things. The patient was able to classify automobiles and people as objects by reference to their particular dimensions, but he could not perceive the expressive, physiognomic qualities that ordinarily distinguish the animate and inanimate for us. The patient explained the difference between people and automobiles this way: 'People are all alike: narrow and long, cars are wide: you notice that at once, much thicker' (Protocol made by Kurt Goldstein and A. Gelb, cited in Ref. 11, p. 241 note). The inability to perceive facial expression is now known as prosopagnosia.³⁰ This phenomenon became widely-known through Oliver Sacks' 'case of the man who mistook his wife for a hat. Upon leaving Sacks' office one of his patients was unable to tell the difference between his wife's head and a hat on a hat-rack. The man's eyesight functioned, but he suffered from a loss of the ability to perceive expression visually. If automobiles, hats, and people can all be seen, but not physiognomic expression, then this limitation cannot stem for not having sensations, but from the inability to recognize expressive meaning. Cassirer's study of the pathology of symbolic consciousness is an extended negative proof of the thesis that symbolism is a ubiquitous phenomenon, whose many facets we can only recognize when their function has been hampered.

The perception of expression has traditionally been only of marginal interest

in philosophy, and usually it has been shunted off into aesthetics as a special problem in the philosophy of art. But consider voices.³¹ We can recognize voices we know almost instantly, and we can tell a person's mood by the sound of their voice, whether they are happy, sad, neutral, tired, busy, or whatever. On Cassirer's theory, this is neither a matter of causality nor immediate intuition but an example of expressive symbolism. The perception of expression is a symbolic process pervading all our waking and dreaming states.

Cassirer presented his philosophical anthropology in a conciliatory and understated manner, but actually it called for a revision of the general direction of Western philosophy. This general direction can be summarized this way: the colour name 'blue' refers to something general and hence to something 'more real' than the actual perception of a colour such as seeing 'this cold blue', and the *measurable* difference on the spectrum between such a blue and an adjacent colour is most real of all.³³ Perception is subjective; extension in space is objective. But in Cassirer's philosophical anthropology each of these aspects of colour are equally real. They exemplify three different kinds of symbolism: representational (the colour word 'blue'), expressive (the perception of 'this cold blue'), and purely significative (blue's place on the spectrum of wavelengths).

Philosophical anthropology does not fit within the confines either of analytic philosophy of language or the anti-humanism typical of much contemporary 'continental' philosophy. Cassirer summed up his philosophical anthropology once this way: 'There is no *consciousness of a me* without consciousness of a you and even less is there a self, an "ipse", except in the general *Medium* of cultural forms, which provide the ways in which we are able to become a self.'^{34,35} We become what we are by participating in what is alien to us – the culture we grow up in. Language is not just a means of communication, it is also a principle of individuation.^{36,37} We become native speakers of a particular language, perhaps with a regional dialect, but we also acquire a way of speaking that is uniquely our own. What is more, a person's language is also a matter of their speaking voice as well, and of its unique expressive qualities. Linguists refer to such matters as prosody – the musical aspect of language. Even having a recognizable voice is a matter of expressive symbolism. Philosophers usually treat the perception of expression as a matter of concern only in the philosophy of art, when in fact it is a ubiquitous phenomenon.

Underestimation of the importance of expressive meaning is by no means limited to philosophy. Today neuroscientists still have to defend themselves from the criticisms of their colleagues when they advocate studying feelings or emotions as well as physiological processes.³⁸ The present day movement in the neurosciences towards the study of what now is being called the 'feeling brain' illustrates the kind of anthropological conception that Cassirer favoured, a science

that would also seek to study what Cassirer called the first basic phenomenon: the feeling of life. This brings me back to emotion.

Emotion

Philosophers have always had difficulties dealing with the topics of feeling and emotion, not due to the methodological scruples that scientists have about how to study them, but because of negative evaluations. Feelings are taken to be entirely subjective and emotions to be irrational. The most famous illustration of this attitude is found in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*.³⁹ There a human being is compared to a charioteer riding behind two horses. The driver is reason, the horses represent the emotions, which are at odds with one another; one horse is high spirited and brave and eager to do the charioteer's bidding while the other is all desire yet also fearful, and its independence threatens to wreck the chariot or at least deflect it from its course. Plato's images can be diversely interpreted and here I want to emphasize the importance of the emotions. The useful and the disruptive animal are both entirely immersed in the world, while reason is pure and untouched, for unlike the horses and the chariot – which stands for the human body – the driver's feet do not touch the ground. He is supposed to be in charge, and he possesses the perspective to see afar, but he must struggle to keep the course he sets, battling against the very forces that pull him and the chariot along. In this image, human beings are split into purely spiritual and purely material components. The former are good while the latter are, at best, a necessary evil. The ancient Stoics sought to eliminate this clash between reason and the passions by eliminating the offending party; they proposed striving to eradicate the emotions in order to attain peace. But if the stoic ideal was attainable, and human beings were actually able to eliminate their emotions, they would not gain control over their lives. The neurologist Antonio Damasio emphasizes that when the emotional capacities of even highly intelligent persons have been impaired by a brain injury, it leaves them adrift, so that they are unable to set priorities and undertake meaningful actions. Their decision-making capacity becomes so impaired that they are no longer able to function in the world, despite the fact that in conversation they can appear perfectly rational and normal.⁴⁰

The sober-minded 18th century philosopher David Hume, broke with the ancient denigration of the emotions in a radical way when he asserted in no uncertain terms that 'reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions.'⁴¹ For Hume, reason consisted of the ability to calculate and make inferences. Reason determines instrumental possibilities of the sort, if you want X, then it is best to do Y. But, Hume concluded: Reason offers no motivation and opposes not! – see Ref. 41, book 2, part 3, sect 2, p. 413). Reasoning does not deal in goals, but in calculating the means to attain them, and unless something is there to provide

goals, action becomes aimless and self-destructive. Hume distinguished two kinds of passions: violent ones such as fear, relating to momentary events, and milder ones responsible for fundamental likes, dislikes, and the long-range desires that constitute a person's 'character.' These 'milder' passions, Hume claimed, are usually confused with reason. These milder passions are what reason is and ought to be a slave to.

But when Cassirer stated that 'A passion can only be overcome by a stronger passion' he emphasized their strength and not their mildness. For Hume, the calm passions generate little emotion and so are known only by their effects. Hence, Hume says a general 'love of life' results in 'kindness to children' and a 'love of sociality' causes humans to seek society. Hume compares these calm passions to the 'force of gravity', for they hold everything together without our noticing it. Hume was writing in the middle of the Enlightenment, while the quotation from Cassirer was written in 1944 when he was a refugee from the Third Reich. He knew that even the kindness to children that Hume believed was part of 'human nature' could not be counted upon. Yet Cassirer was not simply reacting to the times.

Hume regarded Human nature in naturalistic terms and it was fixed. Cassirer's definition of human beings as *animal symbolicum* offered greater room for variation and change.

Hume compared the emotions with gravity because their force was barely noticeable and always constant, Cassirer called the emotions culture's 'volcanic ground'. They are always there, but they can make themselves felt in ways that can shake social life to its foundations. Hume's theory of the emotions, like that of other 18th century thinkers, was based upon the contrast between the moral behaviour found in everyday life and logical reasoning. Even today, these are the two alternatives that still usually concern philosophers.^{42, 43} Cassirer wasn't thinking of either one when he compared the emotions to a volcanic force, but of what he called 'mythic thought.'

In order to work out his theory of mythic thought Cassirer again left the armchair world of philosophical reflection, this time to study ethnology. He did not engage in field research of his own, but sought out ethnologists and became an expert on cultural anthropology.⁴⁴ No philosopher before or since Cassirer devoted as much research to the topic of myth.^{45,46} But no aspect of Cassirer's work has received less attention among philosophers. Even Nelson Goodman, a philosopher whose work owed much to Cassirer's thought, said that the one point on which he could not follow Cassirer, was his 'emphasis on myth'. Goodman agreed with Cassirer that philosophers need to study expressive forms of symbolism, and as a result Goodman investigated what he called the 'languages of art'. But 'art' is a late development in the history of image-making, one that, simply put, nobody believes in.⁴⁷ Artistic images are enjoyed, but mythic imagery

and narratives are believed. Emotionality in art is different from the emotions in mythic thinking.

The most important characteristic of mythic thought is its dependence upon emotion.⁴⁸ For mythic thought feelings of the familiar or strange, the alluring or repellent, the fascinating or threatening, are believed to derive from benign or malignant forces in the world, whose moods infuse everything and which sacrifices and other rituals are intended to assuage. Instead of perceiving emotions temporarily or giving momentary expression to them in an outburst of aggression or devotion, in mythic thought strong emotions assume a kind of constancy by their fixation in imagery, which serves to keep these feelings active. Depictions and ritual actions give emotion an enduring social reality. Physiological expressions of emotions by motor actions such as striking out in anger or shedding tears in grief are short-lived, but when emotions receive symbolic expression in ceremonies or pictures, they are kept alive and revived over and over.^{49–52}

The theoretical lesson here is that psychology and neurology are insufficient if we are to understand *human* emotions. Emotionality in humans is inseparable from the social symbolic forms in which they are expressed. Once emotions are given a symbolic expression in a ritual, an image, or other cultural form, they can take on proportions that cannot be compared with ordinary emotions for they can spread through an entire population. Biologically considered, emotions serve purposes such as protection and procreation and they dissipate after a time. But by gaining a symbolic expression, emotions attain an endurance and intensity which exceeds anything that natural selection or other biological factors can explain.⁵³ They become collectively shared feelings, which can move and fascinate a whole nation for generations. This means that the problem of emotion is ultimately not actually a problem of emotion, but of the symbolic forms of their expression.

With the technical mastery of nature, mythic thought slowly lost its cosmological meaning, but it retained its anthropological value. This is why events from a nation's history and even fictional heroes from a national literature can deeply influence moral beliefs. This is why some philosophers today seek to understand morality by reference to its imaginative representation in literature.^{54,55} That approach conforms to Cassirer's understanding of emotions, which takes their symbolic expression rather than their physical basis or particular psychological manifestation to be the proper concern for a philosophy of emotions. Purely physiological theories treat them as uncontrolled non-cognitive forces – like the horses in Plato's image.⁵⁶

But human emotions are not like animal emotions and given symbolic expression, their force can continue over generations.

Mythic beliefs and their modern secularized political counterparts are not irrational, for they are based upon symbolisms – images and narratives – for their transmission and dissemination.

In his work on mythic thought, Cassirer applied the principle of charity, often appealed to today in the philosophy of language. Cassirer's problem was not just to construe another person's words in a way that permitted us to make our neighbour's message less absurd when they speak in a way we cannot quite follow.⁵⁷ Rather, he applied the principle of charity to ways of thinking that seem wholly alien. He argued that even myth is a kind of thought and it needs to be recognized as such. Unfortunately, however, this charity cannot be reciprocated, for the inherent emotionality of mythic beliefs prohibits a person with such a belief from being charitable to another way of seeing things. You cannot argue with an emotion or with a mythical belief. Myths, like emotions, are impervious to argument, but they are not impervious to other emotions.

Cassirer agreed with Spinoza that two emotional attitudes are within our power: fortitude and generosity. It is within our power to persevere and to be generous. We bring both into play when we employ the principle of charity. We persevere in generously attributing meaningfulness to actions even when they seem irrational and alien to us. They seem irrational because they are uncritical. Mythic beliefs do not tolerate contradiction because they equate certain concrete goods – particular ways of acting and believing – with the good in an ideal sense. But mythic beliefs have a weakness in that they are not free.

Generosity exemplifies a free state of mind. Cassirer claimed that symbolism served the end of human self-liberation, liberation from fear, repression, and ignorance. A person with a mythic belief submits to it out of the emotions of fear and hope. The strength of mythic beliefs derives from the singular dedication that they demand, a dedication that is completely devoid of doubt and therefore totally serious.^{58,59}

Cassirer's begins his investigation of mythic thought with an analysis of moods, centring upon the emotional awareness of two opposites, the 'malevolent' and the 'benign.'⁶¹ These emotional states persist as constants in human experience and culture, underlying, for example, the two theatre genres of Tragedy and Comedy. The classic oppositions between comedy and tragedy, humour and the sublime, were overcome in the early Modern era when Cervantes created the tragi-comedy and Shakespeare put the tragic and the comic on stage together at the same time. Cassirer called the type of emotionality that such works of art engender a '*coincidentia oppositorum*.'⁶² Aestheticians traditionally judged tragedy to be a higher art form than comedy. According to Cassirer's philosophy, their combination is higher yet. A *coincidentia oppositorum* of emotions is the strongest of all. Just as doing something forbidden is all the more exciting because it combines attraction with repulsion, so too having a simultaneous theoretical vision of different perspectives liberates us from the limits and the solemnity of a single outlook. The emotional factors involved do not simply cancel one another out in the fashion of double negation, leaving only a state of indifference or ironic

sense of detachment. Instead, we feel a heightened awareness due to the ‘inner movement’ of simultaneously recognizing the attractions of these different perspectives. In one crucial regard this kind of emotionality can be ‘even stronger’ than the ferocity of emotion found in those possessed by a mythic belief. Mythic beliefs are strong, but the feelings that accompany them take possession of the mind and enslave it. The coincidence of opposite emotions generated from an intellectual outlook do the opposite.

Unlike animals, the human species is not necessarily limited to a single unitary world, and the extent to which people make use of their different capacities, the more myriad the engendered emotions are, and the less subject people will be to the monotony of fear and submission.⁶³

To understand human emotions it is therefore necessary to investigate more than the moral emotions that concerned philosophers like Hume or the expressive symbolism of art that interested Goodman. A general science of expressive meaning was needed that could link these with primitive cultural emotions and natural human feelings. Cassirer’s philosophical anthropology called for the creation of an interdisciplinary science of emotion and feeling, that would investigate the links between developed and more fundamental forms of cultural emotions and natural human feelings. This science would treat human emotions and passions as symbolic processes and not just as non-cognitive physiological processes.⁶⁴ Cassirer did not complete this project, but in recent years researchers have taken important steps in this direction. With the recent advent of the study of feeling in neuroscience and embodied reason in cognitive science, the research program envisioned in Cassirer’s philosophical anthropology, has now been taken up by researchers in the sciences *as well as* in cultural theory. The view that culture consists of signs and symbols is now perhaps the most widespread paradigm for conceiving issues relating to cultural matters, in literary theory, art history, sociology, and other fields.⁶⁵ But Cassirer’s philosophical anthropology was not simply a ‘cultural theory’. It was supposed to provide a link between physical and cultural anthropology. If recent developments in neuroscience, the psychology of expression, cognitive science, and physical anthropology are any indication, then the thesis that human beings are ‘the symbolic species’ is going to be accepted among both scientists and cultural theorists.⁶⁶

The error of earlier anthropological conceptions was not that they venerated reason, but that they ignored the body and so separated reason from emotion. The concept of symbolism, as Cassirer conceived it, overcame this dualism. This philosophical anthropology has been vindicated on many fronts, but replacing the concept of ‘reason’ with that of ‘symbolism’ was no minor revision to the Western philosophical tradition, and the amplification and application of this new outlook has barely begun.

Notes and References

1. M. Scheler (1927) Die Sonderstellung des Menschen. In Hermann Keyserling (Ed.) *Mensch und Erde*, pp. 161–254. Der Leuchter 8 (Darmstadt: Reichl).
2. H. Pleßner (1928) *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch: Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (Berlin/Leipzig: de Gruyter).
3. The course was offered höstterminen 1939/40 as *Enskilda föreläsningar: Grundzüge der philosophischen Anthropologie* (Die ‘Lehre vom Menschen’ in ihrer philosophischen Entwicklung) together with a *Seminarieövningar: Philosophische Übungen zur Kulturphilosophie*. Both were held in rum 4. In vårterminen 1940 the continuation (also as *Enskilda föreläsningar*) was entitled: Grundzüge der philosophischen Anthropologie (Die ‘Lehre vom Menschen’ in ihrer philosophischen Entwicklung), Von der Renaissance bis zur Gegenwart.
4. These texts will appear as volume 6 of the edition of Cassirer’s unpublished papers, *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte* (E. Cassirer (in press) *Zur philosophischen Anthropologie*, Ed. by Gerald Hartung and Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink, vol. 6 of *Cassirer – Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, Ed. by K. C. Köhnke, J. M. Krois and O. Schwemmer (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag).
5. After leaving Germany some of Cassirer’s German writings were not published simply because they were written in German, such as a text on Pico della Mirandola, originally written for the *Journal of the Warburg Institute*.
6. This statement occurs in the unpublished portions of the manuscript for *The Myth of the State* (Box 20, folder 385). This text will appear in the Nachlass edition (E. Cassirer (in press) *Zu Philosophie und Politik*, Ed. by J. M. Krois and C. Möckel, vol. 9 of *Cassirer – Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag)).
7. E. Cassirer (1930) ‘Geist’ und ‘Leben’ in der Philosophie der Gegenwart. *Die Neue Rundschau*, 41, 244–264. Cf. *Gesammelte Werke*. Hamburger Ausgabe, 25 vols, Ed. by B. Recki (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1998ff.) (‘ECW’), vol. 17: *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften, 1927–1931*, Ed. by T. Berben, pp. 185–206.
8. E. Cassirer (1944) *An Essay on Man: Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
9. Cassirer’s theory of expression is explained, e.g., in ‘The Perception of Things and the Perception of Expression’ (Ref. 10, pp. 34–55) and ‘The Expressive Function and the World of Expression’ (Ref. 11, pp. 43–103).
10. E. Cassirer (2000) *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, trans. by S. G. Lofts (New Haven: Yale University Press).
11. E. Cassirer (1957) *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3: *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press).

12. When Cassirer was lecturing in England in 1927, he wrote to Kurt Goldstein (letter in the Goldstein papers, Columbia University Manuscript library, dated London, 4 November 1927), telling him that he tried to visit Henry Head, but that he was too ill to receive visitors. Cassirer had become so involved in these matters that he wrote to Goldstein on 5 January 1925, that in order to understand human beings ‘either the physicians decide to turn into philosophers, or the philosophers become physicians’ (Ref. 13, p. 663).
13. E. Cassirer (1999) Letter to Kurt Goldstein, 5 January 1925, translated by Alexandre Métraux. *Science in Context*, **12**(4), pp. 661–663.
14. M. Hagner (1997) *Homo cerebralis: Der Wandel vom Seelenorgan zum Gehirn* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag).
15. In the new generation of cognitive science, researchers proceeding from ‘the embodied mind’ rather than the model of the computer are now investigating the role of ritual, bodily activity, and emotionality as cognitive factors the way Cassirer did. As Cassirer put it: ‘Not mere observation, but rather action provides the middle point from which for human beings the intellectual organization of reality takes its beginnings’ (Ref. 16, p. 157, translation corrected).
16. E. Cassirer (1995) *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*. In Cassirer – Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte, vol. 1, Ed. by J. M. Krois (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag).
17. E. Cassirer (1945). Structuralism in modern linguistics. *Word: Journal of the Linguistic Circle of New York*, **1**(2) (August), pp. 99–120.
18. For comments on Uexküll and cognitive science see Ref. 19, pp. 23–31. I thank Peter Gardenförs for bringing this book to my attention. Cassirer’s philosophy ties in with contemporary cognitive science in many ways, including his emphasis on the cognitive significance of metaphor, his investigation of ritual action as a form of knowing, and his reform of the theory of concepts as a doctrine of schematization.
19. A. Clark (1997) *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together Again* (Cambridge: The MIT Press).
20. This text will appear in ECN 4 (E. Cassirer (in preparation) Über symbolische Prägnanz, Ausdrucksphänomen und ‘Wiener Kreis’, vol. 4 of Cassirer – Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag)). The manuscript, housed in the Yale Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (Bacon 119, section 5,2), reads: ‘Das Wissen von “mir” ist nicht vor und unabhängig vom Wissen des “Du” und “Es”, sondern dies alles konstituiert sich nur miteinander–’ In the same place it also says: ‘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.’ (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*.)
21. Cassirer asserted that: ‘They (the Basic phenomena) are “prior” to all thought and inference and are the basis of both’ (See Ref. 22, p. 137).

- Cf. Ref. 16, p. 132: 'Sie sind 'vor' allem Denken und Schließen, liegen diesem selbst zu Grunde.'
22. E. Cassirer (1996) *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4: *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, Ed. by J.M. Krois and D.P. Verene, trans. by J.M. Krois (New Haven: Yale University Press).
 23. As he 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' (Ref. 24, pp. 193–194). For an explication of this assertion see Ref. 22, 138f.
 24. E. Cassirer (1979) Language and Art II. In *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935–1945*, ed. by D.P. Verene, pp. 166–195 (New Haven: Yale University Press).
 25. When Cassirer speaks of 'Life' in this phenomenological sense, it isn't a biologist's theoretical conception that is meant, but something we all experience. Cassirer rejects Descartes' notion of the 'cogito' or 'thinking subject' and appeals instead to a conception that is based upon feeling. The neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp (Ref. 26, p. 309) utilizes a conception that agrees closely with Cassirer's criticism of Descartes (Ref. 22, pp. 169–176).
 26. J. Panksepp (1998) *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press).
 27. In his earlier works Cassirer appealed to Goethe's notion of the *Urphänomen* again and again without ever explicating its place in his own thought. The expressive function of meaning is an *Urphänomen* (Ref. 11, p. 87), the experience of the living human body is an *Urphänomen* (Ref. 11, pp. 99–103), so too is the 'person' (Ref. 28, p. 9). Time is an *Urphänomen* (Ref. 11, p. 205). The list could be extended.
 28. E. Cassirer (1941) William Stern, Zur Wiederkehr seines Todestages. *Acta Psychologica*, 5, pp. 1–5.
 29. Cassirer's interactions with Swedish philosophers and his years in Sweden is the topic of a new historical study by Svante Nordin and Jonas Hansson, *Ernst Cassirer in Sweden*, that is to go to press in 2004.
 30. The loss of face-recognition abilities does not eliminate the ability to perceive expression (see Ref. 26, p. 307), for such persons can still identify persons by the sounds of their voices. Sack's patient was still able to perceive expression – in auditory form, in music.
 31. In recent decades literary scholars have neglected the sound of the voice in favour of the concept of 'text.' A valuable corrective is Ref. 32, in which Meyer-Kalkus examines a variety of approaches to the voice and expression, including Cassirer's theory, showing the limits of current 'textual' conceptions of meaning.
 32. R. Meyer-Kalkus (2001) *Stimme und Sprechkünste im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag).
 33. See the commentary on this in Ref. 8, pp. 76–78.
 34. 'Es giebt kein Ich-Bewusstsein ohne Du-Bewusstsein/noch weniger gibt [es] ein Selbst, ein "Solus-ipse" ausser in dem allgemeinen *Medium* der

- Kulturformen, die gerade die Wege *zum* Selbst sind.’ This quotation is from Cassirer, ‘Objektivität der Ausdrucksfunktion,’ ECN 5 (Ref. 35).
35. E. Cassirer (in press) *Zur Kulturphilosophie und zum Problem des Ausdrucks*, Ed. by Rüdiger Kramme, vol. 5 of *Cassirer – Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag).
 36. See his comment in protocol of the Davos debate with Heidegger, (Ref. 37, 292f.): ‘Jeder [von uns] spricht seine [eigene] Sprache, und es ist undenkbar, daß die Sprache des einen in die Sprache des anderen übertragen werde. Und dennoch verstehen wir uns durch das Medium der Sprache. (...) Wir [betreten] hier einen gemeinsamen Boden.’ (‘Each one of us speaks our own language, and it is unthinkable that one person’s language can be translated into the language of the other. And nevertheless we understand each other through the medium of language. ... Here we take a step upon common ground.’).
 37. Davoser Disputation (1973) Davoser Disputation zwischen Ernst Cassirer und Martin Heidegger. In M. Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 4th edn, pp. 246–268 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann).
 38. For example, Panksepp is forced (Ref. 26, p. 341) to argue the obvious, that emotions are ‘essential foundation processes upon which many aspects of the human mind – from art to politics – have been created.’ He denies (Ref. 26, p. 309) the existence of a Cartesian ego or a unified subject that *has* feelings, and contends rather that the feelings constitute a ‘Simple Ego-type Life Form’ (= SELF).
 39. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246a-b, 253c ff.
 40. See A.R. Domasio (1994) *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: G. P. Putnam), which deals with the patient in question (‘Elliot’).
 41. Hume (1978), book 2, part 3, sect. 3, p. 415: ‘Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.’ (D. Hume (1978) *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press).)
 42. This is even true of a modern-day Humean like Simon Blackburn, when he rules out the need to consider the problem of ‘single-mindedness’ in evaluation by simply declaring that ‘we’ are not like that (Ref. 43, p. 240).
 43. S. Blackburn (1998) *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
 44. In Germany Cassirer came into contact with anthropologists at the university of Hamburg, but it was primarily the collection of anthropological literature at Aby Warburg’s library that led him to cultural anthropology. In America, Cassirer met Franz Boas and even came into contact briefly with Claude Lévi-Strauss.
 45. Cassirer’s writings on mythic thought established him as one of the most cited theoreticians in the field. See Ref. 46.
 46. I. Strenski (1987) *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History:*

Cassirer, Eliade, Lévi-Strauss and Malinowski (London: Macmillan Press).

47. Mythic thought could be defined as the absolutization of beliefs.
48. Cassirer sought to show that this type of thought had its own kind of logic, which is found again and again in various cultures and epochs, see Ref. 8, pp. 76–78.
49. The theory derives from Aby Warburg, who coined the term ‘Pathosformel’ to capture this process. See Ref. 50. Cf. Ref. 51, pp. 46–48 and the discussion of Warburg in Ref. 52, 172f.
50. A. Warburg (1999) *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, trans. by David Butt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute).
51. E. Cassirer (1946) *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
52. E. Cassirer (1999). *Ziele und Wege der Wirklichkeitserkenntnis*. In E. Cassirer – Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte, vol. 2, ed. by K.C. Köhnke and J.M. Krois (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag).
53. They become, Cassirer says, a ‘momentum aere perennius.’ See Ref. 51, p. 47.
54. Martha C. Nussbaum is the outstanding figure in the literary approach to the philosophy of emotion. See Ref. 55.
55. M.C. Nussbaum (2001) *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
56. By contrast, today scientists sometimes treat emotions as intelligence, as neurological ‘seeking systems.’ See Panksepp, ‘SEEKING Systems and Anticipatory States of the Nervous System,’ chapter 8 in Ref. 26, pp. 144–163.
57. See W. V. Quine, ‘Ontological Relativity,’ in W. V. Quine (1969) *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, p. 46 (New York: Columbia University Press).
58. Mythic beliefs are no laughing matter. Cf. Ref. 59, pp. 167–191.
59. E. Cassirer (1953) *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, trans. by James P. Pettegrove (Austin: University of Texas Press).
60. Heidegger is well-known for his analysis of moods (*Stimmungen*) in *Being and Time* (first published 1927) but he knew Cassirer’s investigations of moods in his book *Mythic Thought* (first published in 1925; in English as E. Cassirer (1955) *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2: *Mythic Thought*, trans. by Ralph Manheim. (New Haven: Yale University Press)), which Heidegger reviewed in 1928. ‘Das mythische Denken von Ernst Cassirer,’ *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 21 (1928), pp. 1000–1012. Translated as ‘Book Review of Ernst Cassirer’s *Mythical Thought*,’ *The Piety of Thinking* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).
61. M. Heidegger (1976) Book Review of Ernst Cassirer’s *Mythical Thought*. In *The Piety of Thinking*, trans. James G. Hart and John C. Muraldo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).
62. For a discussion of the coincidentia oppositorum of emotions as the highest art see E. Cassirer (1945) Thomas Manns Goethe-Bild. Eine

- Studie über 'Lotte in Weimar'. *Germanic Review* 20(3) (October), pp. 166–194.
63. There is more than a little Renaissance philosophy behind this conception. See Cassirer's discussion of Giordano Bruno's 'Heroici furori' in his 'Nachruf auf Aby Warburg' (E. Cassirer (2004). *Nachruf auf Aby Warburg* (first published in 1929). In *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften, 1927–1931*, pp. 368–374, Cassirer-Werke, vol 17, ed. by Tobias Berben (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag), especially p. 373f).
 64. Cassirer's most extensive treatment of this topic, a text on 'the objectivity of expression' (Zur 'Objektivität der Ausdrucksfunktion') was written in Gothenborg in 1939. It will appear for the first time in ECN 5 (Ref. 35).
 65. An example with references to other fields is S. Hall (Ed.) (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage).
 66. T.W. Deacon (1997) *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York and London: W. W. Norton) refers extensively to Peirce, yet his work bears equally upon Cassirer's conception of *animal symbolicum*. In Cassirer's later writings biology became the centre of attention, displacing physics as the model science for philosophy.
 67. E. Wind (2001) *Experiment and Metaphysics: Towards a Resolution of the Cosmological Antinomies*, trans. by C. Edwards, introduced by M. Rampley (Oxford: European Humanities Research Centre, University of Oxford).
 68. J. M. Krois (1998) *Kunst und Wissenschaft in Edgar Wind's Philosophie der Verkörperung*. In H. Bredekamp *et al.* (Eds), *Edgar Wind: Kunsthistoriker und Philosoph*, pp. 181–205 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag).
 69. E. Wind (1934) *Das Experiment und die Metaphysik: Zur Auflösung der kosmologischen Antinomien* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr).

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