

Thora Ilin Bayer, *Cassirer's Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms. A Philosophical Commentary*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001, 210 pp.

In analytical philosophy the philosophical heritage from logical positivism is sometimes called “the received view”. It contains a Humean view on the nature of causation and lawfulness, a strong distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification (together with the idea that only the context of justification is rational), a view on rationality that is logically biased etc. It is difficult to find one logical positivist that really believed all the ideas that belong to this received view. Nevertheless it is a real force in philosophical thinking. In other domains of philosophy one could just as well talk about a received view with respect to certain philosophical systems or individual philosophers. It was the received view that Jean-Paul Sartre did not develop an ethics, that Leo Apostel was a logical positivist, that (aesthetic, moral and epistemological) realism was obsolete, etc. These beliefs have been proved wrong. It is the received view about Ernst Cassirer that he was a neo-Kantian philosopher. He did not develop a metaphysical system, it is said in the philosophy of history handbook. Apparently this is not true. Several manuscripts on metaphysics were found and a book was written giving a general overview of Cassirer's metaphysics. I will look at the main aspects of Cassirer's metaphysics as it is presented in this book and give an appreciation.

**1A.** An important concept in Cassirer's philosophy is ‘symbolic form’. Under a ‘symbolic form’ should be understood “each energy of Spirit [*Geist*] through which a Spiritual [*geistig*] content or meaning is connected with a concrete, sensory sign and is internally adapted to this sign.” (p. 15, Introduction). It is something with a universal meaning that inheres in a particular sensory sign. A *system* of symbolic forms would grasp the world in its totality, and not from a certain perspective, i.e. both theoretical, ethical, aesthetic and religious.

One of the first things that struck me was that, judging from this book, Cassirer has no separate place for a category of matter in his metaphysics. This is strange and unfamiliar. I have worked on the metaphysics of Leo Apostel for more or less four years, and matter and the theories of matter play a central role. The first thing that needs to be

integrated into a worldview is the science of physics (trying to understand all the abstruse mathematics). The reason for this is the layered conception of the world: first there is the level of matter and energy, then there is the chemical, then there is the biological level of reality and finally there is the social-psychological level of reality. Another way of looking at reality is more holistic: reality as a whole and every part of reality cannot be situated in one of these levels, i.e. every real thing is an unanalyzable mix of physical, chemical, etc. characteristics. Cassirer is definitely somebody that tends towards the holistic view.

I learned, studying Apostel's manuscripts and notes on metaphysics and then studying philosophy of physics, that physics is riddled with preconceptions and a priori's that are never questioned and that have become almost unquestionable ways of thinking. Downplaying matter can be a good thing: in philosophy of science there are philosophers that urge the philosophical community to give more attention to chemistry, biology and especially the social sciences. We have to big a fixation on physics and the material world when it comes to developing metaphysical views.

Reality is a "Fluss des Werdens" for Cassirer. The same is true for its concepts: they are like water. Fluidity is a root metaphor. Because reality as a whole is a flood, the concepts must be fluid too (p. 76). Life and Spirit are aspects of this becoming. Just as Life, Spirit and form, the image of reality as fluidity is non-spatial. But in other places different definitions of reality are given, for example: "The real is ultimately the totality of symbolic forms as produced through the dialectic of Spirit and Life". The first definition seems to indicate ontological (or metaphysical) realism: reality is bigger than our experience and our experience (Life and Spirit) is "contained" in an encompassing reality. In the second definition of reality we have a certain degree of philosophical idealism.

The distinction between Spirit and Life is very important. Life is a principle of union beyond which we cannot go. It is like a simple beam of light that has not been refracted yet. Taken in itself it is whole and closed. It is characterized by movement, change, immediacy, fate, pure becoming. It is also subjectivity, but subjectivity without objects, without self, without enduring characteristics (p. 43). Spirit is the transpersonal sphere of meaning. In it plurality and difference are preserved as a plurality of symbolic forms. Its primary activity is to fix sensation within the flux of Life; from this a world of objects is generated, through symbolic formation. The world of Spirit is both immanent and transcendent. Sym-

bolic forms play a key role is the distinction and connection of Life and Spirit: "The actualisation of symbolic forms is a development from Life into Spirit" (p. 64). Caught up 'in' and raising itself 'above', both 'inside' and 'above' it. Objectivity occurs through the ability to achieve meaning in experience, to elicit non-temporal, enduring features in experience. One should be careful not to identify objectivity with scientific theories. It is achieved in myth, where also several perspectives on things are combined (p. 72-73). In contradistinction to Nietzsche he does not think that Life uses Spirit for the "Will to Power". It is more like "Will to Formation". Spiritual forms do not die like organisms do. They are perpetuated, they continue to exist in the cultural realm. They are a form of freedom from organic necessity.

**1B.** Basis phenomena (*Basisphänomene*). The idea of basis phenomena comes from the poet Goethe. The first basis phenomenon is the 'I' or the 'Self'. It is not the experience of an unchanging substance but the experience of the I as moving, temporal, as something that points to the future and comes from the past, a Heraclitean flux. The second basis phenomenon is the 'act'. It is the active intervention in the environment. You could also describe it as 'you' or 'the other', because it is characterized by resistance, a stubbornness of its own, something that limits our own action. 'The work' is the third basis phenomenon. Examples of a work are a work of art, science, politics, etc. They form systems of work. Works have an inherent meaning, which distinguishes them from actions: actions are done solely for their effect. The work is identified with the world of Spirit.

I briefly look at some other aspects. Cassirer seems to have more or less a coherence theory of truth: "The whole of experience is the measure of truth. Particular experiences or perceptions are measured against this whole" (p. 156). Bayer quotes Cassirer: "Every *individual* perception must be measured within this whole and tested if it is 'true' or 'false'." Cassirer is anti-Kantian in his view of metaphysics: metaphysics is not the enterprise that goes *beyond* experience. None of the great metaphysicians wanted to do that and neither did they do that. Truth can be found *in* human experience. They just overemphasized one aspect of experience. Cassirer thinks of Heraclitus, Leibniz, Spinoza or Hegel. The trick is not to overemphasize one aspect of experience. Cassirer has a lot of sympathy for the romantic and poetic notion of the mysterious that cannot be

dissected with rational-analytical thought to be found in Goethe's writings. Here he differs from the traditional metaphysical philosophers like Spinoza or Leibniz, and he also differs from the rational-analytical views of Descartes and Kant. What cannot be unravelled must be accepted as such.

2. My appreciation of the book. I think everything has a vagueness to it that is typical of Continental philosophy. But even looked at from that point of view, it seems different than what one would expect from Cassirer. Of course, Cassirer did not write this book, so maybe this can be attributed to the writer of the present book. But this feeling of vagueness stays when I look at the content of the metaphysics. It is minimally systematic, very associative and intuitive. I am not saying that is it a bad metaphysics or anything like that, I'm saying it is a poet's metaphysics. It reminds me also of the pre-Socratics and certain "Romantic" notions like *élan vital*, *Wille zur Macht* and the like. Metaphysical systems can be generated on the basis of scientific theories (or scientific practices), artistic practices, political views, etc. Metaphysics is always generated from a certain background. A "poetic" metaphysics is justified, but it would be given more justice if it were expressed *in* poetry. It does not work as good for me if you make it part of a normal academic discursive text, because the format of academic discourse mutilates the content and even hinders the expression of certain contents. It becomes derivative. Nevertheless I think the whole project is highly interesting and I feel very close to the ideas expounded, especially the combination of a coherence theory of truth, relative truth and the experience view of metaphysics. But I should postpone my judgement until reading the manuscripts on metaphysics by Cassirer themselves.

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