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Edward Skidelsky: Ernst Cassirer

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On April 23, 1929, in the famous Swiss resort of Davos, two of the leading philosophers of the day met in debate. On the one side was Ernst Cassirer, distinguished representative of the German idealist tradition and champion of the Weimar Republic. On the other was Martin Heidegger, the younger man, whose recently published *Being and Time* had shaken the idealist tradition to its foundations, and whose politics, though still uncertain, were plainly far from liberal. It was a symbolic moment. The old was pitted against the new, the humanism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries against the radicalism of the twentieth. All agreed that Heidegger, not Cassirer, was the man of the future. No one realized just what that future held in store.

After the debate, some of the attendants staged a humorous reenactment. The part of Heidegger was taken by one of his students, Hans Bollnow, who parodied his teacher's etymologies with lines such as "to interpret is to stand a thing on its head." But the real satire was reserved for Cassirer, played by none other than the young Emmanuel Levinas. His hair covered in white powder, intoning "I am a pacifist" and "Humboldt, culture, Humboldt, culture," the future *maîtres-a-penser* cut a sorry figure of decrepitude and defeat.¹ Thus expired the once glorious tradition of German humanism.

"Humboldt, culture, Humboldt, culture." What exactly did Levinas mean by those words? "Humboldt" referred to Wilhelm von Humboldt, philosopher, statesman, and pioneer of the modern university. "Culture" referred to his spiritual ideal. Together, the two words stood for the conviction, shared by most educated nineteenth-century Germans, that self-realization, not self-sacrifice, is the goal of life, and that we realize ourselves not by retiring from the broader

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world of culture but by embracing it. To grow outward is also to grow inward; knowledge and self-knowledge are one. “The power of the Spirit is only as great as its expression,” wrote Hegel, a leading exponent of this attitude, “its depth only as deep as it dares to spread out and lose itself in its exposition.”²

Humboldt’s ideal gradually came unstuck over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Problems arose in two quarters. Natural science had always been a thorn in the flesh of culture. With its exact method and formulaic language, it was in no obvious sense an *expression* of the human spirit. Goethe himself had fulminated against the narrow dogmatism of the Newtonians. By the end of the nineteenth century, science had swollen into a monstrous leviathan, possessed of a voracious colonizing energy. Its high priests, the positivists, proclaimed in strident tones that it needed no moral or metaphysical sanction, that it was itself the final arbiter of true and false. Science was no longer a branch of culture; on the contrary, culture had to justify itself before science.

Humboldt’s ideal of culture also came under fire from a quite different angle. Faced with the alienating structures of science and its offshoot, the modern factory system, a few bold spirits sought salvation in the depths of the psyche. Here, in the Dionysian, the id, they found that magic that had vanished from the objective world. This was a radically new departure. Humboldt and his contemporaries had by no means ignored the passions, but had viewed them as essentially subservient to the shaping forces of culture. Nietzsche and his successors saw them as wild and unruly. Humboldt had insisted on the harmony of the faculties; these latter discerned a tragic gulf between reason and passion, *logos* and *mythos*. In place of self-realization, man was now confronted with rival forms of self-surrender—to the superpersonal forces of science and technology, or to the subpersonal forces of intoxication and desire. He was torn, so to speak, both upward and downward.

But there was one section of German society that preserved better than most Humboldt’s ideal of culture. Cut off from their own religious traditions, yet denied full participation in civic life, assimilated German Jews embraced their host nation’s philosophy, literature,

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and music with a fervor rooted in anxiety. It was into one such wealthy and cultured family that on July 28, 1874, Cassirer was born. His cousins included the publisher Bruno Cassirer, the art collector Paul Cassirer, and the pioneering Gestalt psychologist Kurt Goldstein. This was a world intimately acquainted with philosophy, art, and science, only superficially with religion, and not at all with politics. Levinas's satire was spot on target. Cassirer's philosophy was indeed an attempt—a characteristically Jewish attempt—to preserve the liberal ideal of culture under increasingly hostile conditions. It was a rearguard action on behalf of a vanishing civilization.

Cassirer's first interest was science. Between the years 1899 and 1910, as the leading young representative of the so-called Marburg school of neo-Kantianism, he wrote a series of epochal works on the history and theory of physics, mathematics, and logic. His aim was to uphold, against the onslaughts of positivism, a broadly Kantian conception of science as an expression of the creativity of human reason. Cassirer later extended a similar approach to Einstein's theory of relativity and quantum physics. It was a losing battle. The recent revolutions in mathematics, logic, and physics were more commonly interpreted as proof *against* Kantianism, however broadly conceived. The march of specialization and technicism continued unabated. By the time of his death, Cassirer's philosophy of science was little more than a historical curiosity.

In 1919, Cassirer took up a professorship at the new University of Hamburg, where he came into contact with the circle surrounding the art historian Aby Warburg. His interests broadened from science in particular to culture in general. In his mature thought, the creativity of reason appears as one aspect of a deeper creativity, at work in all the forms of human culture. "Reason is a very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man's cultural life in all their richness and variety. But all these forms are symbolic forms. Hence, instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as an *animal symbolicum*."³ This redefinition allowed Cassirer to accommodate and temper the irrationalism of Nietzsche and his successors. Unreason was no longer just the amorphous "beyond" of reason, but an integral part of human civilization. It too had its

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distinct modes of expression, its “symbolic forms.” It too was open to education and refinement. Dionysus was given clothes and sent to school.

Cassirer was culturally a liberal, but like many of his generation and background took little interest in politics. Yet from 1928 onward, as the Weimar Republic started to unravel, his outlook became somewhat more worldly. In books, essays, and addresses, he sought to supplement his philosophy of culture with a defense of classical liberalism. In August 1928, he famously proclaimed that “the idea of the republican constitution as such is in no sense a stranger to . . . German intellectual history, let alone an alien intruder; . . . it has rather grown up on its own soil and been nourished by its very own forces, by the forces of idealist philosophy.”⁴ It was a subtle strategy—too subtle, alas, to succeed. In 1933, Hitler came to power, and Cassirer began his years of wandering exile. He spent two years at All Souls College, Oxford, six in Sweden, and a final four at Yale and Columbia. He died suddenly of a heart attack on April 13, 1945, a few days after finishing *The Myth of the State*, his final, belated counterblast to Nazism.

The originality of Cassirer’s endeavor is best brought out by comparison with the two traditions that have dominated twentieth-century philosophy. Analytic philosophy is rooted in the logical work of Bertrand Russell, Gottlob Frege, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and remains attached to a quasi-scientific ideal of neutrality and rigor. “Continental” philosophy, by contrast, is heavily indebted to the irrationalism of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and has close ties to literary modernism and political extremism. This schism in turn reflects the separation of what C. P. Snow famously called the “two cultures”—the exact sciences on the one hand, the arts and humanities on the other. Different styles of thought and writing, different sensibilities and frames of reference, make any dialogue between the two traditions frustratingly difficult.

Cassirer’s enduring interest lies largely in the fact that he was the last great European philosopher to straddle both of the two cultures with equal assurance. Encyclopedically learned in both the natural

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and human sciences, he could engage in serious argument (as opposed to polemic) with Einstein and Moritz Schlick on the one side and Heidegger on the other. His philosophy is fundamentally an attempt at reconciliation. It understands the various branches of culture, scientific and nonscientific, as symbolic constructions, each with its own internal criterion of validity, rather than as attempts to represent a unique mind-independent reality. The conflict between them is thereby defused. Each is able to assert its own distinct “truth” without injury to that of the others. Ultimately, the two cultures are revealed as one, as varying expressions of the same “spontaneity and productivity” that is “the very center of all human activities.”⁵

At this point, I must interrupt the narrative with a confession. The above summary represents the argument of this book as it was originally conceived. It was to be a plea for Cassirer’s continuing importance, a protest against decades of neglect. I was of course aware that Cassirer’s philosophy had met with stringent criticism on both sides of the analytic/continental divide, but put this down to the rigidly sectarian spirit of the mid-twentieth century. “Now that the orthodoxies of the postwar world have faded,” I wrote in an earlier draft, “Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms appears relatively attractive by comparison. For what it offers is the possibility of comprehending and (at least partially) overcoming that very cleavage of which logical positivism and existentialism were no more than unconscious and uncomprehending reflections. It promises to disclose the ‘two cultures’ as aspects of a single culture, as facets of our symbolic creativity.”

But as so often happens, my early enthusiasm began to wane. From under the abandoned hulk of the first book a second, more skeptical one emerged. I now saw that the problems facing Cassirer’s enterprise were far more serious than I had initially supposed. It was not just that many individual aspects of his system had fallen into disrepair, but that the whole thing was no longer obviously *philosophy* at all. Cassirer’s thought is inductive, not deductive in its method. Setting out from the variety of human culture, it attempts to com-

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prehend it as an organic whole. But most twentieth-century philosophy, analytic and continental, has sought a standpoint *beyond* the variety of culture—an absolute conception of consciousness, meaning, or the world. Viewed from this angle, Cassirer does not so much mediate between analytic and continental traditions as fall foul of them both. His “reconciliation” is on terms that neither can accept.

There is, of course, no reason to accept as final the conception of philosophy prevailing in modern philosophy departments. But there *are* reasons to doubt whether Cassirer’s inductivist conception of the discipline could readily be revived. Cassirer was able to conceive of philosophy as the interpretation of culture only because he shared with most of his generation a conception of culture itself as an essentially liberating force. The twentieth century was not kind to that idea. The cancerous growth of bureaucracy, the murderous perversion of science, the self-prostitution of the humanities—none of this portended liberation. The younger generation accordingly sought a standard of truth over and above culture’s shifting tides. The logical positivists found it in the verification principle, Heidegger in authentic existence. Others turned to the Bible or the wisdom of ancient Greece. All agreed that the humanism of the past two centuries had failed. “We encountered situations,” wrote Karl Jaspers in 1948, “in which we no longer had any inclination to read Goethe, but seized on Shakespeare, the Bible or Aeschylus, if indeed we could still read at all.”⁶

Why, then, bother with Cassirer? For the good reason that he was the twentieth century’s most accomplished defender of the Humboldtian ideal. If he failed, it was not for any shortcoming on his part, but because that ideal was itself indefensible. Cassirer’s failure was, in short, exemplary. It was the failure not just of an individual but of an entire cultural tradition. Humboldt’s enchanting vision of harmonious all-round development had ultimately to yield to the hard imperative of choice. The twentieth century had to rediscover for itself the truth, self-evident to the ancient Greeks and Israelites, that not all good things can be had at once, that we must sometimes sacrifice the lesser to save the greater. “If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with

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one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire." Cassirer could not accept this bitter truth. Therefore his thought remains, when all is said and done, a stranger to our age.

When I first conceived this book in 1999, I did not know that others were thinking along similar lines. Since then, the wheels of the "Cassirer industry" have ground into action. In the English-speaking world, this revival of interest is due largely to the publication in 2000 of Michael Friedman's *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger*.⁷ A Kant scholar and philosopher of science, Friedman interprets the three thinkers as responding in different ways to the collapse of Kant's theory of pure intuition and discerns in Cassirer a potential *via media* between the extremes of the other two. I owe a lot to Friedman's work. As will become clear, however, I am less struck than he is by the continuities between neo-Kantianism on the one side and logical positivism and *Existenzphilosophie* on the other, and accordingly less hopeful of finding in Cassirer a recipe for reconciliation. Meanwhile, other philosophers of science, Steven French, James Ladyman, and Barry Gower prominently among them, have seized on Cassirer as a forerunner of the position known as "structural realism."⁸ What does not yet exist, though, is a general interpretation of Cassirer's philosophy of science in light of his philosophy of culture. This book goes some way toward filling that gap.

In Germany, Cassirer has received even more attention, not so much for his philosophy of science as for his cultural theory. Studies pour forth at the rate of five to ten a year. The causes of this "Cassirer Renaissance" are, one suspects, more political than philosophical. A reunited Germany is in desperate need of figureheads who are cosmopolitan in outlook yet distinctively German in intellectual style. Cassirer fits the bill perfectly. That he was Jewish and an enemy of Heidegger also helps. But there are other, more general factors at work. The collapse of Communism makes it possible to see the entire period from 1914 to 1991 as a tragic interlude, following which we are free to rejoin the high road of history. Liberal progressivism is back in fashion, and Cassirer offers a more appealing version of it than American neoconservatism. With his emphasis

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on the spontaneous processes of culture and the plurality of symbolic forms, he has become old Europe's answer to Francis Fukuyama.

But worthy intentions are not always conducive to intellectual clarity. In its anxiety to atone for many decades of neglect, recent German scholarship on Cassirer has tended to paper over the cracks in his thought. Its tone is often pious and hectoring. It insists, against the evidence, that the philosophy of symbolic forms contains a coherent ethics and politics.⁹ Above all, it is loath to admit that Cassirer, for all his decency—indeed precisely *because* of his decency—did not see what Heidegger and many others saw so clearly: that the secular idols of humanity and progress were dead. We non-Germans, enjoying the advantage of distance, are better able to separate the political from the philosophical. We can admire Cassirer's moral grandeur while at the same time acknowledging his intellectual defeat.

We are left, then, with a dilemma. We have inherited Cassirer's liberal political attitudes, but not the cultural sensibility that underlay them. With our skepticism toward progress, our distaste for "bourgeois" formalities, our fascination with charisma, and our endless talk of commitment, authenticity, and roots, we remain, consciously or not, Heidegger's children. We are politically liberal, spiritually illiberal. Is this combination a stable one? And if not, how long can it last? These are questions that this book raises, but cannot answer.