



PROJECT MUSE®

Between Pluralism and Objectivism: Reconsidering Ernst Cassirer's Teleology of Culture

Katherina Kinzel

Journal of the History of Philosophy, Volume 62, Number 1, January 2024, pp. 125-147 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2024.a916714>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/916714>

Between Pluralism and Objectivism: Reconsidering Ernst Cassirer's Teleology of Culture

KATHERINA KINZEL*

ABSTRACT This paper revisits debates on a tension in Cassirer's philosophy of culture. On the one hand, Cassirer describes a plurality of symbolic forms and claims that each needs to be assessed by its own internal standards of validity. On the other hand, he ranks the symbolic forms in terms of a developmental hierarchy and states that one form, mathematical natural science, constitutes the highest achievement of culture. In my paper, I do not seek to resolve this tension. Rather, I aim to arrive at a better understanding of how it arises, and of the different options that it presents for understanding the development of culture. I discuss three recent attempts at resolving the tension, put forward by Sebastian Luft, Samatha Matherne, and Simon Truwant, respectively. Based on a reconstruction of Cassirer's system of symbolic forms that centralizes the concept of function, I show that the most promising of these attempts, formulated by Truwant, is not successful. I then turn to Cassirer's philosophy of the cultural sciences, the implications of which for the present problem have not yet been sufficiently explored. I argue that in this context, Cassirer develops the contours of an alternative to the function-based view of cultural development. I conclude that this alternative does not resolve the tension either, but that it allows for a reconceptualization of the teleology of culture as open.

KEYWORDS Ernst Cassirer, pluralism, objectivity, teleology, scientific progress, philosophy of culture

ERNST CASSIRER OCCUPIES A UNIQUE position in the development from Kant to early twentieth-century philosophy. His conception of a nonmetaphysical scientific philosophy that seeks to explicate the conditions of scientific objectivity puts him in close proximity to Rudolf Carnap and the logical empiricists, while setting him apart from the hermeneutics of finitude of his contemporary Martin Heidegger.¹ At the same time, Cassirer is strongly indebted to the nineteenth-century traditions of hermeneutics and historicism, and his transcendental philosophy of culture

¹Friedman, *Parting of the Ways*; and Gordon, *Continental Divide*.

* Katherina Kinzel is an assistant professor in the history of modern philosophy at Utrecht University.

aligns itself with the interpretative and humanistic disciplines to inquire into anthropological questions.² Cassirer's philosophy has therefore been taken to mediate between Snow's "two cultures," and to integrate what would later come apart in the analytic and continental philosophical traditions.³

And yet, it has also been noted that Cassirer's philosophical thinking remains marked by deep tensions, despite or perhaps because of its integrative efforts. The most important one is what I will refer to as the tension between *pluralism* and *objectivism*. On the one hand, Cassirer describes a plurality of symbolic forms—among them myth, religion, art, language, technology, law, and science—and states that each form must be assessed by its own internal norms of validity, rather than by an external standard. On the other hand, he characterizes the symbolic forms in hierarchical terms and holds that one of them, mathematical natural science, constitutes the purest expression of symbolic consciousness and the highest achievement of culture.

Subsequent debates have focused on how Cassirer's account of the development of symbolic forms should be understood, and whether there is an interpretation of this account on which the tension can be resolved. This paper offers a novel contribution to these debates by emphasizing "function" as the unifying concept of the philosophy of symbolic forms and by considering the implications of Cassirer's later philosophy of the cultural sciences, which constitutes a central locus of his integrative efforts. It is not the goal of this paper to resolve the tension at hand. Rather, it seeks to provide a better understanding of the systematic grounds on which it arises, and of the different options that it presents for understanding and conceptualizing the development of culture.

The paper has four parts. In the first part, I recapitulate the state of the debate and discuss recent attempts at resolving the tension between Cassirer's pluralism and objectivism. In the second part, I present my own interpretation of the system of symbolic forms. I show that Cassirer's teleology of culture draws on the concept of function in a manner that undercuts the most promising attempt at resolving the tension. In the third part, I read Cassirer's philosophy of the cultural sciences as a contribution to the questions at hand. I argue that in this context, Cassirer develops the contours of an alternative to the function-based model of cultural development. Although this alternative does not fully resolve the tension, I conclude that it allows for a reconceptualization of the teleology of culture as open.

I. AN ESSENTIAL TENSION

Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms presents a transcendental account of the conditions of the possibility of culture. According to this account, the basic activity at the root of all culture is symbolization. Symbolization is both constitutive of an intelligible world of objects and constructive of intersubjectively meaningful practices and works. According to Cassirer, the task of cultural creation can be achieved in more than one way. There arises a plurality of symbolic forms, each of which is characterized by a specific modality. In addition to myth, language,

²Endres, "Genealogische Kulturanthropologie"; and Hartung, *Maß des Menschen*.

³Friedman, *Parting of the Ways*; and Skidelsky, *Cassirer*.

and mathematical natural science, Cassirer also discusses religion, art, technology, law, and history as different symbolic forms and therefore as distinct modes of symbolic worldmaking.

Throughout his oeuvre, Cassirer makes two kinds of statements that seem to be in conflict with one another. On the one hand, he emphasizes the irreducibility and incommensurability of symbolic forms. Each symbolic form constitutes an autonomous path "by which spirit proceeds in its objectification" (ECW 11:7/*PSF* 11:7).⁴ It carries out a "new 'construction' of the world . . . according to a specific standard of measure that is valid for it alone" (ECW 11:122/*PSF* 11:123).⁵ Thus it cannot be measured by the criteria of another symbolic form. "To determine with certainty the particularity of any spiritual form, it is necessary first that it be measured by its own standards. The perspective, according to which it is to be judged and its achievement assessed, may not be introduced from the outside but must be taken from its own basic lawfulness of forming" (ECW 11:122/*PSF* 11:123).⁶ For example, myth follows its own "immanent rule" and has "a 'necessity' distinctive to it" (ECW 12:17/*PSF* 2:17).⁷ To regard it as a deficient form of scientific knowledge would be to misconstrue it. I call this the *pluralist* thesis.

On the other hand, Cassirer frequently places the different symbolic forms in a hierarchy, drawing on distinctions between the "primitive" and the "high" to characterize the relative status of different symbolic forms to one another. He claims that in mathematical natural science, symbolization achieves the "highest perfection" of the "logical form of experiential thinking" (ECW 12:36/*PSF* 2:38).⁸ The natural sciences are in conflict with more primitive symbolic forms like myth. In overcoming them, they liberate symbolization from sensibility (ECW 13:18–21/*PSF* 3:18–21). Cassirer even goes as far as to state that "science is the last step in man's mental development and . . . may be regarded as the highest and most characteristic attainment of human culture" (ECW 23:223). I call this the *objectivist* thesis, and I provide a rationale for this term in the second part of the paper.

When it comes to the question of assessing different symbolic forms, it is not always apparent whether Cassirer considers the forms in their capacity to provide knowledge and an understanding of the world, or whether he is talking about their ethical value as contributions to human culture more generally. It is sometimes unclear whether their epistemic validity or their ethical value is at stake. As we will see, this ambiguity between epistemic and ethical is central for the tension and its potential resolution.

⁴"Die Wege, die der Geist in seiner Objektivierung, d. h. in seiner Selbstoffenbarung, verfolgt."

⁵"Jede neue Form stellt in diesem Sinne einen neuen 'Aufbau' der Welt dar, der sich nach spezifischen, nur für sie gültigen Richtmaßen vollzieht."

⁶"Um die Eigentümlichkeit irgendeiner geistigen Form sicher zu bestimmen, ist es vor allem notwendig, daß man sie mit ihren eigenen Maßen mißt. Die Gesichtspunkte, nach denen sie beurteilt und nach welchen ihre Leistung abgeschätzt wird, dürfen nicht von außen an sie herangebracht, sondern sie müssen der eigenen Grundgesetzlichkeit der Formung selbst entnommen werden."

⁷"Auch dem Mythos gegenüber kann daher die Frage der Objektivität nur in dem Sinne gestellt werden, daß wir untersuchen, ob auch er eine ihm immanente Regel, eine ihm eigentümliche 'Notwendigkeit' erkennen läßt."

⁸"Die logische Form des Erfahrungsdenkens tritt am schärfsten heraus, wenn wir es in seiner höchsten Ausbildung, in der Gestaltung und im Aufbau der Wissenschaft, insbesondere in der Grundlegung einer 'exakten' Wissenschaft der Natur, betrachten."

Prima facie, pluralism and objectivism are in conflict with one another. As a pluralist, Cassirer maintains that different symbolic forms cannot be ranked according to the same standards, yet as an objectivist, he proceeds to rank them and declares science the highest one. As a pluralist, he regards the different symbolic forms as genuinely autonomous yet mutually compatible expressions of reason, yet as an objectivist, he finds myth and science to provide conflicting, incompatible constructions of the world.

In the literature, this conflict is tied to two different models of the system of symbolic forms, a centrifugal and a teleological model. These present us with two different spatial images to capture the interrelations and development of symbolic forms. Michael Krois interprets Cassirer's dynamic account of culture according to a centrifugal model in which the various symbolic forms "separate and fan out from the first form of myth and henceforth remain opposed."⁹ On the centrifugal model, there is a common center, myth, from which all symbolic forms emerge genetically and to which they continue to be related. Their circular arrangement around this center suggests difference but not hierarchy. Michael Friedman initially takes up this model, observing that Cassirer breaks with Kant in attributing "an independent status and foundational role"¹⁰ to primitive symbolic forms. "We have what has been aptly called a 'centrifugal' structure, as the more primitive forms give birth to the more sophisticated forms arranged around a common origin and center."¹¹ The centrifugal model foregrounds Cassirer's pluralist commitments.

However, Friedman goes on to explain that Cassirer is centrally concerned with the unity of symbolic forms, and that in this context, he resorts to a Hegelian picture on which all symbolic forms "are necessary parts of a single phenomenological process of development."¹² Friedman thus interprets the system of symbolic forms in terms of a teleological model, which arranges the forms linearly, such that later forms develop out of earlier ones (rather than from a common center or basis). This then allows for ranking symbolic forms in terms of their relative distance from the origin, or conversely, their relative approximation of the telos of culture. On this model, the development of culture is seen to be directed toward a highest end: there is a hierarchy of symbolic forms, and science is the highest one. The teleological model is linked to objectivism.¹³

According to Friedman, Cassirer never resolves the resulting tension. "Since 'objective validity' . . . finds its 'highest' expression in the purely formal significative meaning characteristic of modern abstract mathematics, it is radically unclear how practical, as opposed to theoretical principles can share in such 'objective validity' at all."¹⁴ Although Friedman's point concerns practical reason, the worry is of broader significance: if the mathematical natural sciences reach objective validity in the highest sense, to what extent can the other symbolic forms be claimed to be valid?

⁹Krois, *Cassirer*, 79.

¹⁰Friedman, *Parting of the Ways*, 100.

¹¹Friedman, *Parting of the Ways*, 103.

¹²Friedman, *Parting of the Ways*, 135.

¹³Although Hegel is frequently the reference point, several authors have shown that there is a neo-Kantian background to Cassirer's teleology of culture; see e.g. Edgar, "Hermann Cohen"; Kim, "Neo-Kantian Ideas"; and Renz, *Rationalität der Kultur*.

¹⁴Friedman, *Parting of the Ways*, 144.

Recent scholarship has attempted to show that the tension between pluralism and objectivism, or between the centrifugal and the teleological model, can be resolved. Sebastian Luft argues that Cassirer is less invested than his Marburg predecessors in providing the plurality of symbolic forms with a foundational unity or in attributing an overarching logic of development to them.¹⁵ For this reason, Luft takes the centrifugal model to be an adequate description of Cassirer's system.¹⁶ He emphasizes the ways in which the different symbolic forms are interwoven with one another: myth is their common basis, all symbolic forms use a language of some sort, and they are all directed at providing a cognitive grasp of the world. Nevertheless, Luft too acknowledges the teleological motives: Cassirer thinks that each form develops through three stages—a mimetic, an analogical, and a symbolic stage. He also identifies an overarching principle of symbolic formation that is realized in the triad of expression, representation, and signification. By this overarching principle, symbolization teleologically achieves "the self-liberation of the human being."¹⁷

However, Luft argues that the centrifugal and the teleological model can be reconciled. First, he argues that there is nothing inconsistent about the claim that the different symbolic forms each are characterized by a particular, internal logic, while at the same time also sharing in a more general, developmental logic that directs them toward the telos of culture.¹⁸

Second, he claims there is no conflict of validity between these two types of logic. Each symbolic form has the tendency to consider its own standpoint as absolute. However, from the external perspective that surveys the totality of symbolic forms, each of them can be seen to have only limited, relative validity. "A mythical and a scientific worldview contradict one another when compared horizontally, when they are *deliberately placed into competition* with one another by comparing their respective 'claim for absolute validity'. This competition exists when they are compared *from within* each stance. But when seen *from without*, from a higher vantage point that does not take such an absolute stance, the contradiction vanishes, because they are recognized as *different* but equally valid manifestations of the symbolic mind."¹⁹

Finally, Luft interprets the teleology of culture as an open one that does not privilege a specific symbolic form or philosophical viewpoint as absolute. An open teleology is such that the end of culture is not determined. This can mean that the goal is unknown, or, as I will suggest in the last part of this paper, that it is known but can be realized in multiple ways. Luft's open teleology is of the former kind: while cultural development is goal directed, according to Luft, we do not know where this directed activity leads us. Because the system of symbolic forms "is not teleologically oriented to science (or philosophy), but teleological to somewhere beyond, we know not where,"²⁰ the external perspective that surveys and compares the different symbolic forms remains pluralist and does not lead to an objectivist hierarchy between them.

¹⁵Luft, *Space of Culture*, 131–32.

¹⁶Luft, *Space of Culture*, 206.

¹⁷Luft, *Space of Culture*, 179.

¹⁸Luft, *Space of Culture*, 180.

¹⁹Luft, *Space of Culture*, 178.

²⁰Luft, *Space of Culture*, 206.

Luft's account of an open teleology captures the idea that culture presents a task that needs to be taken on by each generation anew, and I will revisit this suggestion in the conclusion of this paper. However, it fails to make sense of those passages that suggest a linear hierarchization of symbolic forms, the clearest example being Cassirer's explicit statement that science is "the highest and most characteristic attainment of human culture" (ECW 23:223). As Simon Truwant has pointed out, the relevant conflict is not between the internal, absolutist perspectives of individual symbolic forms, on the one hand, and the external, pluralist perspective of the philosopher, on the other, but rather between "two 'external viewpoints,' or two positions that Cassirer holds in his capacity as a philosopher: his claims for and against a hierarchy of symbolic forms both express a philosophical take on human culture as a whole."²¹

An attempt to resolve this tension in external viewpoints has been formulated by Samantha Matherne. Matherne distinguishes between what she calls Cassirer's irreducibility thesis and his teleology thesis. Matherne distinguishes the irreducibility thesis from Krois's centrifugal model since it is not an empirical claim about the origins of the symbolic forms in myth. Rather, it is a claim about each form possessing an "autonomous function that makes a distinctive contribution to our cultural world,"²² yielding a "pluralistic account of the relation between the symbolic forms, as coexisting in their difference."²³

Matherne contrasts the irreducibility thesis with the teleology thesis, according to which there is a progression and hierarchy among symbolic forms. While Luft argues for an open teleology, Matherne gives a definition of the telos of culture: "Like Kant and Hegel before him, Cassirer conceives of the telos of culture in terms of the 'consciousness of freedom,' and he, therefore, regards progress in culture as the progress of consciousness of freedom."²⁴ Her reconstruction organizes the various symbolic forms in virtue of their respective contributions to the recognition of theoretical and practical freedom. Matherne shows not merely that Cassirer presents an abstract argument for the teleological model, but that this model is reflected in his concrete descriptions of each of the symbolic forms: mathematical natural science is the highest of the symbolic forms with respect to the telos of theoretical freedom, while law ranks highest when it comes to the recognition of practical freedom.²⁵

Yet Matherne claims that there is no inconsistency between the pluralist and the teleological dimensions of Cassirer's thinking: the different symbolic forms are irreducible yet unequal contributions to the end of culture.²⁶ While Luft's

²¹Truwant, "Cassirer's Enlightened View," 123.

²²Matherne, *Cassirer*, 142.

²³Matherne, *Cassirer*, 143.

²⁴Matherne, *Cassirer*, 143–44.

²⁵An alternative understanding of the relevance of freedom for Cassirer's system of symbolic forms has been put forward by Birgit Recki. She observes that Cassirer's conception of productive spontaneity oscillates between *poesis* and *praxis*, and thus between an aesthetic-technical and an ethical understanding of culture. She explains Cassirer's failure to formulate an account of morality as an independent symbolic form by reference to the fact that in this way cultural production in general is already imbued with an ethical significance; see Recki, *Kultur*, 164–67.

²⁶Matherne, *Cassirer*, 143.

reconstruction deemphasizes Cassirer's hierarchical thinking, Matherne takes the opposite route and glosses over his pluralism. She renders the relevant claim as a weak irreducibility thesis. However, Cassirer states not only that different symbolic forms are irreducible to one another, but also that they are incommensurable. He makes the strong claim that the "perspective, according to which it is to be judged and its achievement assessed, may not be introduced from the outside" (ECW 11:122/*PSF* 1:123). Matherne fails to make sense of how this statement, expressing a philosophical perspective that calls for an internal assessment, can be made compatible with the perspective of the teleology thesis that imposes an assessment from the outside.

The most promising attempt at resolving the tension is developed by Truwant. Like Luft and Matherne, Truwant distinguishes between two perspectives from which the relevant claims are being put forward. On Truwant's reading, the relevant distinction is between a transcendental and a critical perspective. The transcendental perspective is concerned with revealing symbolic consciousness as the condition of culture, and it identifies irreducibly different functions of symbolization, each of which entails its own criteria of validity for understanding the world.²⁷ The critical perspective, in contrast, identifies a progression among the symbolic forms in terms of the degree to which they further the self-understanding of symbolic consciousness. While Matherne had identified the telos of culture with the consciousness of freedom, Truwant points out that symbolic consciousness can only regard itself as free if it grasps its own character as symbolic. He therefore interprets the teleology of culture as being directed toward the achievement of self-understanding. Truwant also argues that it is with respect to the self-understanding of symbolic consciousness that mathematical natural science ranks higher than other symbolic forms. "Modern science . . . is the 'highest attainment of human culture,' not because it offers the most accurate view of the world or the purest access to 'reality,' but because it fully recognizes itself as an a priori framework of interpretation."²⁸

On Truwant's reading, Cassirer's pluralism should be interpreted as a claim about the contribution that the different symbolic forms make toward understanding the world. With respect to their claims to epistemic validity, each should be measured by its own standards. Cassirer's teleological statements, in contrast, concern not the epistemic validity of symbolic forms as worldviews, but their ethical value for furthering the self-understanding of symbolic consciousness.²⁹

Truwant's reading does not gloss over Cassirer's pluralist statements, nor does it deemphasize his linear teleology of culture. Instead, it provides an interpretative framework that incorporates both dimensions of his thinking: it reads Cassirer as an epistemic pluralist who maintains a hierarchy of different symbolic forms on ethical grounds.

While I consider Truwant's account to be the most promising attempt at resolving the tension so far, it presupposes that the epistemic and ethical

²⁷Truwant, "Cassirer's Enlightened View," 129.

²⁸Truwant, "Cassirer's Enlightened View," 135.

²⁹Truwant, "Cassirer's Enlightened View," 136.

dimensions of Cassirer's thinking can be separated, and that there is no strong systematic link between symbolic self-understanding and (scientific) objectivity. In the section to follow, I argue that this separation cannot be maintained.

2. THE FUNCTION-BASED TELEOLOGY OF CULTURE

To develop my argument, I reconstruct Cassirer's system of symbolic forms and how it grounds a teleological conception of culture. My interpretation is based on the idea, shared with several commentators, that "function" is the central unifying concept of Cassirer's philosophy of culture.³⁰ Cassirer first develops this concept in his philosophy of the natural sciences. In *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (1910), he reworks traditional epistemological problems from the angle of a theory of concept-formation, that is, a theory of how the concepts of the mature sciences receive their content. Cassirer argues that the mathematical natural sciences do not acquire *substance-concepts* by comparing particulars and abstracting a common element. Rather than abstracting away from particulars, scientific concepts achieve their thorough determination. "The genuine concept does not carelessly disregard the peculiarities and particularities of the contents which it holds under it but seeks to show as *necessary* the occurrence and nexus of just these particularities. What it gives is a universal rule for the connection of the particular itself" (ECW 6:19/*SF* 19–20).³¹

Cassirer models the scientific concept on the mathematical function. A function expresses how the values of a dependent variable correspond to the specified values of one or more independent variables. The dependence relations involved are invariant: while the numerical values vary, the relations from which they are generated do not. Moreover, it is precisely the invariant relation that gives the numerical values of the elements. The function is thus a law or general rule for the determination of particulars. According to Cassirer, scientific concepts are *function-concepts* because they (1) grasp invariant relations of dependence and (2) provide the rules for determining particulars.

The clearest case can be found in mathematics. Cassirer endorses Richard Dedekind's mathematical structuralism. This is, roughly, the view that mathematics presents us with a system of ideal objects that do not have intrinsic, nonstructural properties. Rather, mathematical objects are defined in terms of their positions in a structure. For example, numbers are not entities preceding their relations, but exist only within the ideal relations of the entire number structure (ECW 6:36–38/*SF* 35–37).

But for Cassirer, mathematics does not merely constitute a realm of *sui generis* ideal objects. Rather, it plays a central role in the transcendental logic that accounts for how knowledge of empirical objects is possible: the dependency relations expressed in mathematical functions are precisely what enable the extension of mathematical procedures to the physical realm. The mathematical *a priori* is thus

³⁰See e.g. Capeilleres, "Philosophy as Science"; and Truwant, "Concept of 'Function.'"

³¹Translation altered. "Der echte Begriff lässt die Eigentümlichkeiten und Besonderheiten der Inhalte, die er unter sich faßt, nicht achtlos beiseite, sondern er sucht das Auftreten und den Zusammenhang ebendieser Besonderheiten als *notwendig* zu erweisen. Was er gibt, ist eine universelle Regel für die Verknüpfung des Besonderen selbst."

constitutive of the empirical, allowing for the synthetic process of the progressive determination of particulars. Thus, structuralism applies to the empirical sciences as well.³²

An important consequence of Cassirer's functional account of concept formation is the redefinition of the concept of "experience" in terms of structural holism.³³ Here, Cassirer proceeds along well-known Kantian lines. He argues that experience does not consist in pure, unconnected sense impressions, but instead always contains an order. This order presupposes an activity of synthesis, as well as concepts that provide the rules for synthesis. Cassirer gives this Kantian point a strong conceptualist reading. According to him, we should not think of synthesis as a secondary procedure that is carried out on a given content. Rather, there is no content of experience without conceptual order at all: the elements of experience are determined in and through their mutual relations (ECW 13:8–9/*PSF* 3:8–9). In science, function-concepts grasp the invariant structures of experience and determine particulars from this structure (ECW 6:272–75/*SF* 252–55).³⁴

Cassirer introduces his view on function-concepts together with an account of scientific progress. He notes that the distinction between the variant and the invariant is not absolute. Any scientific judgment that claims universal validity might, at a later point, be reconceived as restricted in scope. In fact, progress in science typically means that earlier theories are relativized and restricted to a specified range of conditions by their successors.³⁵ Science moves from the variant to the invariant, and it is the ultimate goal of science to identify invariants that are of unconditional and unlimited validity. "This process would be completed as soon as we succeeded in advancing to the ultimate constants of experience in general which, as we have seen, constitute both the presupposition and the goal of research" (ECW 6:298/*SF* 277).³⁶ Cassirer mentions space, time, magnitude, and number, as well as functional dependency and cause, as the ultimate *a priori* invariants that "ground every determination of natural-lawlike connections in general" (ECW 6:290/*SF* 269).³⁷

³²See also Biagioli, "Ernst Cassirer's Transcendental Account"; and Morman, "Idealization."

³³For an account of how this version of holism relates to Duhem and Quine, see Richardson, "Holism."

³⁴One way of reading Kant, informed by the form/matter distinction introduced in the Transcendental Aesthetic, states that sensibility provides the matter of our experience, which is then structured by the forms of intuition (space and time) and the categories. Apart from the fact that Cassirer tends to think of space and time as forms of relations, and in this sense, as akin to concepts, he also rejects the two-step model of how the order of experience comes about. In the Transcendental Deduction, he finds evidence that Kant himself was pushed to move beyond the dualism of matter and form (ECW 13:8–9/*PSF* 3:8–9). There is quite some disagreement as to what exactly Cassirer's conceptualism entails, how strong it is, how much it remains indebted to Cohen, and what its repercussions for the success of Cassirer's philosophical project are. I cannot discuss these issues in any detail, but I want to note two points. First, Cassirer is a conceptualist at least in holding that there is no unformed matter of intuition that would enter consciousness at a preconceptual stage. Every content of consciousness is always already synthesized. Second, in the context of the philosophy of science, Cassirer thinks of synthesis as conceptual determination based on function-concepts.

³⁵See also Ferrari, "'Wachstum' oder 'Revolution.'"

³⁶Translation altered. "Der Abschluss dieses Prozesses wäre erreicht, sobald es uns gelungen wäre, zu jenen letzten Konstanten der Erfahrung überhaupt vorzudringen, die, wie sich zeigte, zugleich Voraussetzung und Ziel der Forschung bilden."

³⁷Translation altered. "Apriorisch können nur jene letzten logischen Invarianten heißen, die jeder Bestimmung naturgesetzlicher Zusammenhänge überhaupt zugrunde liegen."

As stated in the quote above, Cassirer takes these a priori invariants to be both a presupposition and a goal of scientific research.³⁸ They are what science approximates, but they are also already operative in it at any given stage of the research process. They guide the direction of theory transformation, and they are preserved in scientific revolutions. Put differently, it is the goal of science to uncover the a priori principles that are already operative in it. To the extent that science is successful in this task, scientific progress can be described as the gradual self-purification of the a priori invariants of experience.

It is precisely this model of progress that allows Cassirer to construct a teleology of culture as well. Cassirer does this first by generalizing the notion of function from science to all modes of symbolization, and second by conceiving the development of symbolic forms in analogy with scientific progress.

In his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Cassirer not only envisions a plurality of symbolic forms, each of which structures experience in a unique way. He also describes the process of symbolization that is common to all forms as functional. Thus, “function” is not restricted to mathematical natural science, but it is operative in all symbolic forms. In symbolization, a particular mental element, or a particular sign, carries meaning or content in virtue of being embedded in a whole of relations and because it is capable of expressing the whole in the particular element. The meaning of a particular symbol is thus determined on the basis of the structured whole that it participates in. “Every ‘simple’ quality of consciousness has a determinate content only in so far as it is apprehended, at the same time, in a throughgoing unity with others and in a throughgoing separation from others. . . . Every single existence of consciousness has its determination through the fact that in it, at the same time, the whole of consciousness is in some form coposited and represented” (ECW 11:30–31/PSF 1:30).³⁹ “Function,” understood *in a broad sense*, is the process by which an element gains a content in and through its placement in a structured whole. And this broad notion of function is not limited to mathematics or science. “Whether we inquire into intuition or pure thinking, into linguistic or logical-mathematical concept formation: we always find that ‘one-in-many’ that presents and expresses itself to us as something identical in meaning in the most diverse stages of concretion” (ECW 13:343/PSF 3:349).⁴⁰

³⁸There is some controversy about the precise character of Cassirer’s a priori. Some think that Cassirer anticipates Reichenbach’s relative yet constitutive a priori, e.g. Ferrari, “Cassirer”; Padovani, “Relativizing”; and Ryckman, “Conditio.” Others have interpreted it as absolute and regulative, e.g. Friedman, *Parting of the Ways*. Perhaps the most detailed reconstructions are given by Heis and Matherne, who identify different layers of a priori forms in Cassirer: relative and constitutive, absolute and constitutive, as well as absolute and regulative. See Heis, “Realism,” 14; and Matherne, *Cassirer*, 104–6. While I agree that Cassirer offers such a stratified account of a priori forms, I take him to at the same time erode the distinction between constitutive and regulative uses of reason. Cassirer’s a priori invariants of experience, even when presented as regulative, are not merely a “focus imaginarius” that orients our systematizing activity. Rather, they are active governing principles at work in scientific object-determination. And in this sense, they are constitutive for the dynamic whole of experience.

³⁹“Jede ‘einfache’ Qualität des Bewußtseins hat nur insofern einen bestimmten Gehalt, als sie zugleich in durchgängiger Einheit mit anderen und in durchgängiger Sonderung gegen andere erfaßt wird. . . . Jedes einzelne Sein des Bewußtseins hat eben nur dadurch seine Bestimmtheit, daß in ihm zugleich das Bewußtseinsganze in irgendeiner Form mitgesetzt und repräsentiert wird.”

⁴⁰Translation altered. “Ob wir die Anschauung oder das reine Denken, ob wir die sprachliche oder die logisch mathematische Begriffsbildung befragen: Immer finden wir in ihnen jenes ‘Eine im

Cassirer suggests that consciousness itself is characterized by structural holism. Consciousness is a whole of relations in which each element gains determinate meaning to the extent that it is able to represent the entire structure (ECW 11:25–33/PSF 1:24–32). The symbolic world of culture is created when this natural symbolism of consciousness gets extended into the use of sensible symbols for organizing experience.⁴¹ In the third volume of *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Cassirer distinguishes between three different “functions of consciousness” upon which the symbolic structuring of the whole of experience is based: the expressive function creates a world without stable boundaries between appearance and essence, in which every phenomenon is animated and carries affective significance. This is the symbolic world of myth. The representative function constructs a world of stable substances that can be located in a unified spatiotemporal order. It is at the basis of natural language and modern everyday perception. The significative function is exhibited in the pure category of relation and produces the functional concepts of the natural sciences.

Note that Cassirer is effectively working with two concepts of function. The first is the *demanding concept* of function as realized in the mathematical natural sciences. Their concepts (1) grasp invariant relations of dependence, (2) provide the rules for determining particulars, (3) place particulars in a structured whole, and (4) express the progressive self-purification of the invariants of experience.

The second is the *broadened concept* of function as involved in all symbolization, and as differentiated into expression, representation, and signification. Functions in the broad sense are at work in all symbolization: they place particulars in a structured whole (3) and effect a teleological development toward signification (4). But they do not grasp invariant relations of dependence (1), and they do not provide lawlike rules for determining particulars (2). Cassirer explicitly rejects the view that symbolization in cultural domains other than science is based on determining laws (ECW 13:61–62/PSF 3:63–64). This is not to deny that each symbolic form develops according to its own formative principle (or function), and Cassirer indeed sometimes uses the term ‘law’ in his characterizations of myth and language. But he thinks that these forms do not bring out invariant structures in experience, and they determine particulars to a lesser degree than the natural sciences. In his philosophy of the cultural sciences, he expresses the difference by noting that the cultural world is marked by a constancy not “of properties or laws, but of meanings” (ECW 24:433/LCS 75).⁴² To disambiguate between laws in the sense of structural invariants that determine particulars and other formative or structuring principles, I reserve the term ‘law’ for the former. While all symbolization is functional in the sense that it involves a structured whole of relations, not all symbolization uses function-concepts that determine the particular on the basis of structural laws.

Vielen’ wieder, das sich uns, als ein seinem Sinn nach Identisches, in den verschiedensten Stufen der Konkretion darstellt und ausprägt.”

⁴¹See also Recki, *Cassirer*, 34–38; and *Kultur*, 59–64.

⁴²Translation altered. “Die Konstanz . . . ist nicht die von Eigenschaften oder Gesetzen, sondern von Bedeutungen.”

Nevertheless, the two types of function are systematically linked in teleological terms: function in the broad, symbolic sense is teleologically realized by function in the demanding, scientific sense. In the third volume of *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Cassirer discusses the problem of how myth and science, despite being in conflict with one another, are unified in spirit. To address this difficulty, he takes recourse to Hegelian themes.⁴³ “Every figure through which spiritual consciousness as such passes belongs in some way to its permanent and enduring holding. The surpassing of a particular form is itself only possible because this form does not vanish, is not eradicated completely, but arrests in the continuity of the whole of consciousness and is preserved in it. For what constitutes the unity and totality of spirit is precisely that there is no absolute ‘past’ in it” (ECW 13:87–88/*PSF* 3:90).⁴⁴ He goes on to argue that although the mythical consciousness is overcome by science, the function that was at work in it is preserved at later stages of the development of culture. “Nothing of the mythical formations need be salvaged in the reality of experience and in the sphere of its objects—and yet it can still be shown that the potency of spirit whose first concrete manifestation was myth, asserts itself in a certain respect and that within the new ‘dimension’ of theoretical self-consciousness, it lives on” (ECW 13:88/*PSF* 3:91).⁴⁵

Because function is the unifying principle of all symbolic forms, Cassirer can conceptualize their development as a teleological process that is analogous to the progressive development of natural science. Function is operative already at the most primitive levels of symbolization. Thus, the process of culture can be understood as the gradual purification of functional symbolization itself—just as the scientific process consists in the self-purification of the a priori invariants of experience. In the development from the expressive, over the representative, to the significative function, the functional activity of symbolization is liberated from the sensible and comes into its own. The primitive world of myth consists of fleeting events that are structured by affective meanings. The structures involved are not stable or invariant, however. Natural language then precipitates out of

⁴³Cassirer quotes from the preface of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* in order to elucidate his own understanding of symbolic forms as being unified in movement (ECW 13:VI–VII/*PSF* 3: xxxiii–xxxiv). There is some debate on how successfully he integrates the Kantian and Hegelian themes of his philosophical thinking, and whether the shift from the philosophy of science to the philosophy of culture goes hand in hand with a reorientation from Kant to Hegel. I cannot explore these questions in any detail here, but I want to note that Hegelian themes are present in Cassirer’s philosophy of science already. In particular, the holist conception of experience, the view that cognition amounts to progressive conceptual determination, and the account of mathematical functions as concrete universals have a Hegelian ring to them. In precisely these Hegelian themes, there is a continuity between Cassirer’s progressivist philosophy of science and his later dynamic account of symbolic forms.

⁴⁴Translation altered. “Vielmehr gehört jegliche Gestalt, durch die das geistige Bewußtsein überhaupt hindurchgeht, in irgendeiner Weise auch zu seinem bleibenden und dauernden Bestand. Das Hinausgehen über eine bestimmte Form ist selbst nur dadurch möglich, daß diese Form nicht schlechthin versinkt, nicht völlig ausgelöscht wird, sondern daß sie in der Kontinuität des Bewußtseins-ganzen stehenbleibt und in ihr bewahrt bleibt. Denn ebendies macht die Einheit und die Ganzheit des Geistes aus, daß es in ihm keine absolute ‘Vergangenheit’ gibt.”

⁴⁵“Nichts von den mythischen Gebilden braucht sich in die Wirklichkeit der Erfahrung und in den Kreis ihrer Gegenstände herüberzuretten—und dennoch kann sich zeigen, daß jene Potenz des Geistes, deren erste konkrete Äußerung der Mythos war, sich in einer bestimmten Hinsicht behauptet und daß sie, innerhalb der neuen ‘Dimension’ des theoretischen Selbstbewußtseins, in neuer Gestalt, in einer Art von Metamorphose, weiterlebt und weiterwirkt.”

the mythical flux of experience a world of stable substances. The intuitive world of natural language provides the basis for the development of scientific concepts. These replace the world of substantial objects with function-concepts. On the primitive level of myth, functional symbolization is still entangled with sensibility and substance. In mathematical natural science, symbolization is liberated from the sensible, and grasps itself as pure functional symbolization.

At this point, we can return to Truwant's attempt to resolve the tension between Cassirer's pluralist commitments and his hierarchical thinking. As I have indicated, this resolution is only feasible if the epistemic perspective that is the basis of Cassirer's pluralism and the ethical perspective that grounds the teleological hierarchy can be kept distinct from one another.

My reconstruction of the function-based system of symbolic forms suggests that this separation is not feasible. Cassirer's teleology of culture arises because function in the *broad symbolic sense* purifies itself toward function in the *demanding scientific sense*. There is a systematic link between the ethical task of bringing functional symbolization to self-understanding and the epistemic task of realizing scientific objectivity. The teleology of culture entails objectivism.

Note that Cassirer does not define objectivity as adequacy to a preexisting, unsymbolized world. Rather, the "degree of objectivity" (ECW 6:298/*SF* 277)⁴⁶ that a particular scientific concept enjoys depends on the extent to which it can serve the role of an invariant in the structured whole of experience. Objectivity then consists precisely in the identification of invariant structural laws. Cassirer maintains this account of objectivity also in his later works in the philosophy of the cultural sciences: "The prevailing of such a structural law: that is the most general expression for what we denote in the widest sense with the term 'objectivity'" (ECW 24:369/*LCS* 13).⁴⁷ While other symbolic forms are based on their own formative functional principles, and thus are not without structure, they do not bring out invariant structures in experience, and they do not determine particulars. It is in this sense that science reaches a higher form of objectivity than other symbolic forms.

Now it is precisely its superior claim to epistemic objectivity that allows science to achieve the self-understanding of symbolic consciousness. Truwant is right that this goal is attained by science "not because it offers the most accurate view of the world or the purest access to 'reality.'"⁴⁸ However, it is attained because science is objective, in the sense that it identifies structural invariants. Precisely by identifying invariant structural laws and by determining particulars on their basis does it effect the liberation of the symbolic from the sensual. The purity of symbolization, liberated from the sensual, in turn enables symbolic consciousness to grasp itself as symbolic. The ethical task of culture—the self-understanding and, on its basis, free self-realization of symbolic consciousness—thus coincides with the epistemic goal of one of the symbolic forms: objectivity in mathematical natural science.

⁴⁶"Maß der Objektivität."

⁴⁷Translation altered. "Das Walten eines solchen Strukturgesetzes: das ist der allgemeinste Ausdruck für das, was wir im weitesten Sinn mit dem Namen der 'Objektivität' bezeichnen."

⁴⁸Truwant, "Cassirer's Enlightened View," 135.

To conclude, the tension between Cassirer's pluralism and his teleological claims cannot be resolved because the epistemic and ethical perspectives from which the respective claims are formulated are not strictly separate from one another. The teleology of culture gives rise to an *objectivism* that is in direct conflict with Cassirer's *pluralism*.

3. EXPRESSIVE MEANING AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

I now turn to Cassirer's philosophy of the cultural sciences that, in the context of the present discussion, has not yet received the attention that it deserves. "Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften" (1942) is a central document of his integrative philosophical efforts. In this text, Cassirer returns to the problem of concept formation, inquiring into the question of how the cultural sciences—that is, disciplines like political history, art history, anthropology, linguistics, religious studies, and jurisprudence—form their concepts. In order to answer this question, he brings key concepts from his account of natural science together with insights from his philosophy of symbolic forms. His enquiry reflects his dual concern for securing scientific objectivity and for doing justice to the interpretative character of human existence. Moreover, Cassirer presents the cultural sciences as being integrative disciplines themselves: they relate concepts of structure to a mode of perception that grasps the expressive character of cultural meanings. Cassirer himself does not relate his reflections on expressive meaning to his teleology of culture. Yet I argue that they contain fruitful suggestions toward an alternative to the function-based teleological model.

Although Cassirer takes the cultural sciences to provide an autonomous, *sui generis* type of scientific knowledge, he also identifies important commonalities with the natural sciences. In particular, he holds that not only physics, chemistry, and biology, but also psychology, linguistics, history, and the theory of art, show a tendency toward structuralism and relational concepts (ECW 24:319–20). He discusses two examples in more detail: linguistics and art history.

In "Structuralism in Modern Linguistics" (1945), Cassirer characterizes linguistic structuralism as the view that language is a coherent system in which individual elements are mutually dependent on one another, and in which these dependencies accord with general principles. Language is "organic in the sense that it does not consist of detached, isolated, segregated facts. It forms a coherent whole in which all parts are interdependent upon each other" (ECW 24:310). The concepts of modern linguistics thus aim to represent "not the objects that are studied . . . but the connections and relations which we can ascertain between these objects" (ECW 24:307). Put differently, linguistics uses structure-concepts.

With respect to art history, Cassirer notes that historical facts "must remain mute if we have not first ascertained certain conceptual perspectives according to which they are to be ordered and interpreted" (ECW 24:417/LCS 60).⁴⁹ For this discipline, too, he argues that the relevant interpretative frame is provided

⁴⁹"Daß die Tatsachen als solche stumm bleiben müssen, wenn man sich nicht zuvor bestimmter begrifflicher Gesichtspunkte versichert hat, gemäß denen sie zu ordnen und zu interpretieren sind."

by “pure *concepts of structure*” (ECW 24:420/*LCS* 62).⁵⁰ These concepts express the formal or structural features of works of art. One of Cassirer's examples is Heinrich Wölfflin's account of styles. A style is a set of formal principles that is at work in the creation of an artwork, and it can be captured by the cultural sciences to the extent that their concepts are structure-concepts. “Each particular science of culture develops certain concepts of form and style and uses them to establish a systematic survey, a classification and differentiation of the phenomena with which it concerns itself” (ECW 24:416/*LCS* 58).⁵¹

Like the function-concepts of the natural sciences, the structure-concepts of the cultural sciences fulfill two interrelated tasks. First, they capture the relational features of their objects, for example the syntax of natural language, or the stylistic principles that characterize a certain class of artworks. Second, by capturing these stable relations, they provide a conceptual frame in which particulars can be interpreted. For example, Wölfflin distinguishes between a “linear style” that represents the solid, tangible shape of objects, and a “painterly style” that captures the impression of light as it hits the eye.⁵² This conceptual distinction then allows him to situate particular Renaissance and Baroque works on a spectrum that ranges from the linear to the painterly.

However, Cassirer argues that the specific task of the cultural sciences consists not only in capturing structures. Rather, the cultural sciences also need to draw on expressive perception (ECW 24:398–400/*LCS* 41–43). In his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Cassirer introduces the expressive function as that which allows us to experience the world as filled with life and meaning and as having affective significance. The expressive function creates a symbolic world of immediate presence characterized by unstable, fluid structures. Crucially, it does not distinguish between appearance and essence, mind and matter, or the symbol and symbolized. As Cassirer writes about myth, “Mythical consciousness does not infer the being from the appearance, but rather possesses it: it has the being in the appearance. . . . The actual given phenomenon never has here a character of a mere surrogate representation, but rather the character of an authentic presence” (ECW 13:75/*PSF* 3:78).⁵³

Cassirer goes on to argue that the expressive function also grounds our experience of other subjects. “It is no other and no less than that form of knowledge in which the reality not of natural objects but of other ‘subjects’ is opened up to us” (ECW 13:88/*PSF* 3:91).⁵⁴ Perception then does not merely consist in the perception of a world of things. It originally includes perception of a world of

⁵⁰Translation altered: “die reinen *Strukturbegriffe*.”

⁵¹“Jede besondere Kulturwissenschaft bildet bestimmte Form- und Stilbegriffe aus und benützt dieselben zu einem systematischen Überblick, zu einer Klassifikation und Unterscheidung der Erscheinungen, von denen sie handelt.”

⁵²Wölfflin, *Grundbegriffe*, 20–79.

⁵³“Das mythische Bewußtsein schließt nicht von der Erscheinung auf das Wesen, sondern es besitzt, es hat in ihr das Wesen. . . . Das jeweilig gegebene Phänomen hat hier nirgend den Charakter bloß stellvertretender Repräsentation, sondern den Charakter echter Präsenz.”

⁵⁴Translation altered. “Es ist kein anderes und kein geringeres als jene Form des Wissens, in der sich uns die Wirklichkeit nicht sowohl von Gegenständen der Natur als vielmehr von anderen ‘Subjekten’ erschließt.”

other subjects. We do not need to infer the reality of other subjects from their physical bodies; we rather perceive other subjects and their mental states directly in their bodies.

As Tobias Endres observes, all symbolic forms can be understood to be based on expression to the extent that they transform mental content into sensible symbols. Thus, every form of meaning, including that created by autonomous, higher symbolic forms, remains genealogically tied—although irreducibly—to expressive perception. Because the characteristic mode of expression is that of an immediate presence, expressive perception secures direct access to a reality of meaningful particulars.⁵⁵

We can now detail how the cultural sciences involve expressive perception. The expressive function grounds our capacity for understanding the meaning of cultural works: the cultural object is a human creation, an expression of mental life. In expressive perception, we perceive this mental life directly in the cultural work, just as we perceive the mental life of embodied subjects (ECW 24:399–400/*LCS* 42–43). Cassirer illustrates the role of expressive perception in the cultural sciences with an example from art history. Raphael's *The School of Athens* is not merely a canvas with determinate colors and shapes. Rather, the painting has a meaning. The meaning of the painting can be understood on the basis of the cooperation of the representative and the expressive functions. First, the representative function allows the colors and shapes on the canvas to suggest an object. We see through the shapes and colors something that is objective: we perceive the scene, in this case a conversation between two philosophers. Second, the meaning of the painting is not fully captured by its representational aspects, but is partly constituted by the expressive function. "For in truth it is not Plato and Aristotle who speak to us here, but Raphael himself" (ECW 24:400/*LCS* 43).⁵⁶ The meaning of the painting is a result of a unique artistic personality having expressed his thoughts, emotions, and entire worldview in the painting.

Cassirer holds that the factor of the personal—the expression of the inner mental life of individuals—cannot be eliminated from the meaningful realities of human culture. Whatever artifacts or behaviors are studied by the cultural sciences, the question as to what a phenomenon "means" points back to expression, and to what "representations, thoughts, or feelings find their expression in it" (ECW 24:399/*LCS* 42).⁵⁷ Because cultural objects are imbued with expressive meaning, expressive perception needs to play a role in all disciplines that seek to account for their meaningful content.

The crucial question is how the cultural sciences relate structure-concepts and expressive perception to one another. Cassirer notes that the structure-concepts of the cultural sciences differ from the function-concepts of the natural sciences in one central respect: they do not provide us with laws that allow for the derivation and determination of particulars. In the cultural sciences, "it is possible to *classify* the particular within the universal; but it cannot be *subordinated* in the same

⁵⁵Endres, *Ernst Cassirers Phänomenologie*, 138–39, 147, 150.

⁵⁶"Denn nicht Platon und Aristoteles, sondern Raffael ist es, der hier in Wahrheit zu uns spricht."

⁵⁷"Was dieses Geschehen 'bedeutet,' d.h. welche Vorstellungen, Gedanken, Gefühle in ihm ihren Niederschlag finden."

manner" (ECW 24:428–29/*LCS* 70).⁵⁸ The structure-concepts of the cultural sciences "do indeed *characterize* but they do not *determine*: the particular which falls under them cannot be deduced from them" (ECW 24:431/*LCS* 72–73).⁵⁹ Unfortunately, Cassirer does not explicate the concept of coordination that is supposed to account for the relation between the universal and the particular in the cultural sciences in any depth. For this reason, his account of the autonomous type of knowledge achieved in these disciplines remains underdeveloped.

And yet, Cassirer's reflections on the expressive meaning of cultural works are worthy of more detailed consideration. They contain the contours of a view on cultural development that presents a genuine alternative to the function-based teleological model. For Cassirer not only claims that the meaning contents of cultural objects are rooted in the expressive function. He also emphasizes that expressive meanings need to be actualized in spontaneous acts of reinterpretation. Cultural meanings are not finished products that are passively transmitted from one historical generation to the next. Rather, they need to be actively acquired, recreated, and reinterpreted in the context of the present. As Cassirer writes, the content of great works of art "only persists for us by being continuously acquired anew and thus always created anew" (ECW 24:470/*LCS* 111).⁶⁰ The historical understanding of cultural works is therefore always an act of "palingenesis": "History, however, never attempts to set before us mere past existence, it seeks to teach us to understand past life. . . . What is actually preserved for us from the past are specific historical memorials—'monuments' in word and writing, in image and in bronze. This becomes history for us only when in these monuments we see symbols, through which we not only recognize specific forms of life, but by virtue of which we are able to restore them for ourselves" (ECW 24:435/*LCS* 76–77).⁶¹

Anne Pollok reconstructs the dialogical view of culture that underpins Cassirer's account of historical knowledge and understanding. On this view, symbolization is neither the unproblematic externalization of a predetermined mental content in a cultural object, nor is it a process of alienation in which an original inner life is compromised by its expression. Rather, through cultural creation, agents orient themselves toward others and are understood by others. Ultimately, agents are only constituted through the work, because it is only in and through the work that they are understood.⁶² Crucially, dialogue is prior to the elements that enter into it: it constitutes the agents who communicate, as well as the meaningful contents that are being communicated. Just as there are no elements of experience prior

⁵⁸Translation altered. "Auch hier lässt sich das besondere dem Allgemeinen in irgendeiner Weise *einordnen*, aber es läßt sich ihm nicht in derselben Weise *unterordnen*."

⁵⁹Translation altered. "Derartige Begriffe *charakterisieren* zwar, aber sie *determinieren* nicht: Das Besondere, was unter sie fällt, läßt sich aus ihnen nicht ableiten."

⁶⁰Translation altered. "Ihr Gehalt besteht für uns nur dadurch, daß es ständig von neuem angeeignet und dadurch stets aufs neue geschaffen wird."

⁶¹Translation altered. "Die Geschichte aber will niemals bloß vergangenes Sein vor und hinstellen, sie will uns vergangenes Leben verstehen lehren. . . . Was uns tatsächlich von der Vergangenheit aufbewahrt ist, sind bestimmte historische Denkmäler: 'Monumente' in Wort und Schrift, in Bild und Erz. Zur Geschichte wird dies für uns erst, indem wir in diesen Monumenten Symbole sehen, an denen wir bestimmte Lebensformen nicht nur zu erkennen, sondern kraft derer wir sie für uns wiederherzustellen vermögen."

⁶²Pollok, "First and Second Person," 343–46.

142 JOURNAL OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY 62:1 JANUARY 2024
to synthesis, so too there is no determinate meaning content prior to symbolic communication.

Cassirer's view of culture as dynamic dialogue specifies how the functional symbolization operative in all symbolic forms is realized by human agents in concrete historical circumstances. However, by emphasizing the situated and recurring character of symbolization, he significantly moves beyond the function-based account.

As reconstructed above, functional symbolization is the process by which a particular sign acquires meaning in virtue of being embedded in a structured whole. The function-based account then presents the development of symbolic forms as one in which the functional activity of symbolization—the activity of placing particulars in a structure—is gradually purified: in the mathematical natural sciences, symbolic consciousness comes to grasp itself as pure symbolization. The development of the natural sciences is continuous and linear because the *a priori* invariants that ground the “determination of natural-lawlike connections in general” (ECW 6:290/*SF* 269) are preserved in theory transformation and because they guide the direction that this transformation takes toward increasing purification of symbolization.

In “Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften,” Cassirer considers that for large parts of culture—language, art, religion, and possibly law—functional symbolization is tied to expression. Through symbolic expression in these fields, agents orient themselves toward others and are understood by them. Here too, signs acquire meaning in virtue of being embedded in a structured whole. Symbolization proceeds by placing particulars in a structure. But this happens in the manner characteristic of the expressive function. First, what makes a cultural object an expression is that “representations, thoughts, or feelings” (ECW 24:399/*LCS* 42) are directly present in it. The symbol and what it represents are inseparable. Second, cultural objects require situated interpretative acts to actualize them. Because they are imbued with expressive meaning, their understanding always takes the form of interpretation. Interpretation actualizes the life that is expressed in the cultural object in and for a new context, and in doing so, it revivifies and modifies the very meaning structures that the interpretation was based upon.

Note that Cassirer sometimes speaks of cultural meanings as invariants. He claims that the meanings attached to and encountered in cultural objects are “repeatable and recurring; something that does not cling to the bare here-and-now but is meant and understood in countless life-moments and in the appropriation and use by countless different subjects as one-and-the-same, identical with itself” (ECW 24:371/*LCS* 15).⁶³ Cultural meanings are “invariants” because they make intersubjectivity across different historical contexts possible. But the invariants of culture are different from those captured in the natural sciences, since the constancy at stake is “not that of properties or laws, but of meanings” (ECW 24:433/*LCS* 75). And as per Cassirer's own account, this constancy is not a particularly

⁶³Translation altered. “Diese Bedeutungen sind ein Wiederholbares und Wiederkehrendes; ein Etwas, das nicht am bloßen hier und jetzt haftet, sondern das in unzählig vielen Lebensmomenten und in der Aneignung und dem Gebrauch von Seiten noch so vieler verschiedener Subjekte als ein sich selbst Gleiches, Identisches gemeint und verstanden wird.”

strong one, as the meaning-structures involved are subject to reinterpretation and transformation: "If they are to be 'universally communicable,' if they are to form a bridge between different subjects, linguistic forms and art forms must possess an inner firmness and consistency. Yet, at the same time, they must be capable of transformation, for every use of the forms . . . already includes a certain modification and would not be possible without it" (ECW 24:476–77/*LCS* 118).⁶⁴ Interpretative acts recreate what they interpret, and they restructure what they build upon. "Here again the thing created does not stand vis-à-vis or over against the creative process; on the contrary, new life continuously pours into the 'molded form' and protects it from 'steeling itself to rigidity'" (ECW 24:471/*LCS* 113).⁶⁵

At this point, a genuine alternative to the function-based teleology of culture is conceivable. The teleological purification of symbolic consciousness presupposes the separability of the symbol and what it represents, yet the expressive character of cultural objects is predicated on their inseparability. And the linear directionality achieved by the teleological model presupposes invariant structures, while interpretation entails that meaning structures are modified. For these reasons, the cultural development that emerges in and through the historically situated reinterpretation of cultural expressions does not entail a process of linear purification.⁶⁶

Cassirer nevertheless seems to think that the recurring reinterpretation of expressive meanings achieves genuine self-understanding. This is true for the interpretations that the cultural sciences provide. According to Cassirer, history seeks to "understand past life" (ECW 24:435/*LCS* 77), and to the extent that it is successful, it constitutes "a form of self-knowledge" (ECW 23:206). More generally, in inquiring into different symbolic forms, the cultural sciences seek to understand the human being "that meets us again and again in a thousand manifestations and in a thousand masks in the development of culture" (ECW 24:434/*LCS* 76).⁶⁷ But it is not merely the reflective activity of the cultural sciences that effects self-understanding. The historical process itself involves the interpretation of past cultural objects. Because interpretation actively recreates past meanings *in* the present, it leads to a heightened self-understanding *of* the present. Cassirer is especially interested in those moments in historical time that can be characterized

⁶⁴Translation altered. "Sprachliche und künstlerische Formen müssen, wenn sie 'allgemein mitteilbar' sein, wenn sie eine Brücke zwischen verschiedenen Subjekten schlagen sollen, eine innere Festigkeit und Konsistenz haben. Aber sie müssen zugleich wandlungsfähig sein; denn jeder *Gebrauch* der Formen schließt, da er in verschiedenen Individuen vor sich geht, schon eine gewisse Modifikation ein und wäre ohne sie nicht möglich."

⁶⁵Translation altered. "Das Geschaffene steht also auch hier dem schöpferischen Prozess nicht einfach gegenüber oder entgegen: In die 'geprägte Form' strömt vielmehr immer neues Leben ein, das sie davor schützt, sich 'zum Starren zu waffnen.'"

⁶⁶My reconstruction leaves open whether and on which systematic grounds this view of culture could be rendered compatible with the function-based model. For the symbolic form of language, Cassirer makes the claim that it is internally driven through a "mimetic," an "analogical," and a "symbolic" stage. And Matherne ("Status of Art") argues that the symbolic form of art is capable of a teleological evolution that runs parallel to the teleology of the natural sciences. I do not have the space to explore these questions, but hope to at least make the case that Cassirer's reflections in "Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften" make a genuine alternative conceivable.

⁶⁷"Denn es ist letztenendes derselbe Mensch, der und in tausend Offenbarungen und tausend Masken in der Entwicklung der Kultur immer wieder entgegentritt."

as a “Renaissance.” In these periods, the process by which the content of a past age is taken up corresponds to a process of creative production through which the present achieves “peculiar interpenetration of what is one’s own and what is foreign” (ECW 24:471/*LCS* 112),⁶⁸ and thus comes to understand itself better. Reinterpretation and self-understanding are linked, since our own culture “becomes accessible to us only if we actively enter into it” (ECW 24:434/*LCS* 76).⁶⁹ Interpretative historical knowledge “is the answer to definite questions, an answer which must be given by the past; but the questions themselves are put and dictated by the present” (ECW 23:192). Although these remarks remain cursory and underdeveloped, Cassirer here hints at the possibility of a form of self-understanding that does not arise as the result of a linear development of purification but that remains contextually bound and historically situated. Through the reinterpretation of cultural objects, symbolic consciousness grasps itself—not as pure symbolization, but as a human expression.

4. PLURALIZING THE TELEOLOGY OF CULTURE

I would like to conclude this paper by reflecting on how the alternative account of cultural development that I have derived from Cassirer’s reflections on expressive meaning relates to the tension between *pluralism* and *objectivism*. In this paper, I discussed three attempts to resolve this tension, and I argued that Truwant’s distinction between an epistemic pluralism of symbolic world-understandings and an ethical teleology toward self-understanding is the most promising one. Yet I have also shown that this distinction cannot be maintained, since the ethical telos is, via the concept of function, systematically linked to the epistemic achievement of one of the symbolic forms: mathematical natural science. The teleology of culture implies a hierarchy of symbolic forms according to which the ethical task of culture—self-understanding—is realized in the epistemic contribution of scientific objectivity.

My argument proceeded on systematic grounds. Yet I also want to note that the textual evidence complicates the attempt to resolve the tension at hand. When Cassirer says that the criterion for assessing the achievement of a symbolic form “may not be introduced from the outside but must be taken from its own basic lawfulness of forming” (ECW 11:122/*PSF* 1:123), he does not restrict this claim to epistemic achievements. It is only on the following page, after the pluralist requirement of internal assessment has been introduced in general terms, that Cassirer discusses the case of cognition. Taken at face value, the statement cited does not seem to leave open the possibility of introducing an external criterion of assessment, not even an ethical one. Ultimately, I believe that the tension in philosophical commitments that comes to the surface in Cassirer’s conflicting statements about the hierarchy of symbolic forms cannot and should not be interpreted away. Rather, it should be seen as one of the core problems that motivates and drives his philosophical efforts. For this reason, I do not take the alternative picture of cultural development that emerges in “Zur Logik der

⁶⁸“Eigentümliche Durchdringung des Eigenen und des Fremden.”

⁶⁹“Eine Kultur wird uns nur zugänglich, indem wir aktiv in sie eingehen.”

Kulturwissenschaften" to offer a perspective from which this tension can be fully resolved.

However, I want to suggest that this alternative allows for an interesting reconceptualization of the teleology of culture as open. As reconstructed above, Luft interprets Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms in terms of an open teleology. On his interpretation, there is no hierarchy of symbolic forms because the highest point of development is not located in any particular symbolic form, such as natural science, nor does it coincide with the perspective of the philosopher. "The position of the philosophy of symbolic forms is an absolute idealism, with the difference from Hegel that the philosopher's standpoint is no standpoint of its own but parasitic upon the individual standpoints of the symbolic forms. Hence, despite Cassirer's proximity to Hegel, absolute idealism is not teleologically oriented to science (or philosophy), but teleological to somewhere beyond, we know not where."⁷⁰ Although there is an emancipatory tendency of culture, its endpoint is "neither 'high culture' nor scientific cognition,"⁷¹ but genuinely open. Culture presents a task that is not realized in a linear development but that needs to be taken on by each generation anew.

In this paper, I followed Truwant in embracing a stronger reading of the telos of culture. On this reading, the teleology of culture is not completely open, because Cassirer spells out its goal in terms of the self-understanding of symbolic consciousness. The recognition and realization of freedom, the "emancipatory tendency" that Luft talks about, becomes possible only based on this self-understanding.

Now I have argued, against Truwant, that the function-based account of culture leads to an even stronger closure of the teleology because it systematically links self-understanding to scientific objectivity. But I have also read Cassirer's remarks on expressive meaning as hinting toward an alternative model of cultural development, a model that does not entail a closed teleology. Here culture indeed appears as a task that needs to be taken on by each generation anew, since cultural objects call for their recurrent reinterpretation in ever changing historical circumstances. And the purification achieved in the mathematical natural sciences does not present the only way in which symbolic consciousness might be able to understand itself. For in the recurrent and historically situated acts of the reinterpretation of cultural objects, symbolic consciousness comes to understand itself not as pure signification, but as a human expression.

I take this to be the most striking implication of Cassirer's reflections on cultural meaning: the telos of culture—the self-understanding of symbolic consciousness—can be realized in a plurality of different ways, some of which remain bound to expression. The teleology of culture then remains open not because the goal of culture is left undefined, but because this goal can be realized in different ways, involving the contributions of a plurality of symbolic forms.⁷²

⁷⁰Luft, *Space of Culture*, 206.

⁷¹Luft, *Space of Culture*, 212.

⁷²Previous versions of this paper have been presented at the conference Truth and Objectivity in Cassirer's Philosophy of Culture and Philosophy of Science organized by Tobias Endres and Simon Truwant, at the Twelfth Meeting of Studies on the Origins of Contemporary Philosophy organized

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Biagioli, Francesca. "Ernst Cassirer's Transcendental Account of Mathematical Reasoning." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 79 (2020): 30–40.
- Capeilleres, Fabien. "Philosophy as Science: 'Function' and 'Energy' in Cassirer's 'Complex System' of Symbolic Forms." *Review of Metaphysics* 61 (2007): 317–77.
- Cassirer, Ernst. *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften (1941–1946)*. Vol. 24 of *Ernst Cassirer Werke*, edited by Birgit Recki. Hamburg: Meiner, 2007. [ECW 24]
- . *Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*. Vol. 23 of *Ernst Cassirer Werke*, edited by Birgit Recki. Hamburg: Meiner, 2006. [ECW 23]
- . *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*. Translated by Steve G. Lofts. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000. [LCS]
- . *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. Vol. 1, *Die Sprache*. Vol. 11 of *Ernst Cassirer Werke*, edited by Birgit Recki. Hamburg: Meiner, 2021. [ECW 11]
- . *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. Vol. 2, *Das mythische Denken*. Vol. 12 of *Ernst Cassirer Werke*, edited by Birgit Recki. Hamburg: Meiner, 2002. [ECW 12]
- . *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. Vol. 3, *Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis*. Vol. 13 of *Ernst Cassirer Werke*, edited by Birgit Recki. Hamburg: Meiner, 2002. [ECW 13]
- . *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Vol. 1, *Language*, translated by Steve G. Lofts. London: Routledge, 2021. [PSF 1]
- . *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Vol. 2, *Mythical Thinking*, translated by Steve G. Lofts. London: Routledge, 2021. [PSF 2]
- . *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Vol. 3, *Phenomenology of Cognition*, translated by Steve G. Lofts. London: Routledge, 2021. [PSF 3]
- . *Substance and Function and Einstein's Theory of Relativity*. Translated by William Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey. Chicago: Open Court, 1923. [SF]
- . *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff. Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen der Erkenntniskritik*. Vol. 6 of *Ernst Cassirer Werke*, edited by Birgit Recki. Hamburg: Meiner, 2000. [ECW 6]
- De Warren, Nicolas, and Andrea Staiti, eds. *New Approaches to Neo-Kantianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Edgar, Scott. "Hermann Cohen on the Role of History in Critical Philosophy." *European Journal of Philosophy* 30 (2022): 148–68.
- Endres, Tobias. *Ernst Cassirers Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung*. Hamburg: Meiner, 2020.
- . "Genealogische Kulturanthropologie. Erinnerungen an Ernst Cassirer." *Interdisziplinäre Anthropologie* 8 (2021): 289–315.
- Ferrari, Massimo. "Cassirer and the Philosophy of Science." In De Warren and Staiti, *New Approaches to Neo-Kantianism*, 261–84.
- . "'Wachstum' oder 'Revolution'? Ernst Cassirer und die Wissenschaftsgeschichte." *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 35 (2012): 113–30.
- Friedman, Michael. *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger*. Chicago: Open Court, 2000.
- Gordon, Peter. *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Hartung, Gerald. *Das Maß des Menschen. Aporien der philosophischen Anthropologie und ihre Auflösung in der Kulturphilosophie Ernst Cassirers*. Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2003.
- Heis, Jeremy. "Realism, Functions, and the A Priori: Ernst Cassirer's Philosophy of Science." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 48 (2014): 10–19.
- Kim, Alan. "Neo-Kantian Ideas of History." In De Warren and Staiti, *New Approaches to Neo-Kantianism*, 39–58.
- Krois, John. *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987.
- Luft, Sebastian. *The Space of Culture: Towards a Neo-Kantian Philosophy of Culture (Cohen, Natorp, and Cassirer)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Luft, Sebastian, and J. Tyler Friedman, eds. *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer: A Novel Assessment*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015.

by Mario Ariel González Porta, and at the workshop Classical and Contemporary Themes from the Philosophy of Culture organized by Sebastian Luft. I want to thank the organizers and participants of these events for many fruitful discussions that have furthered my thinking on Cassirer's philosophy of culture. For detailed comments and insightful observations on an earlier draft of this paper, I want to thank Simon Truwant, two anonymous reviewers, and the editors of this journal.

- Matherne, Samantha. *Cassirer*. London: Routledge, 2021.
- . "The Status of Art in Cassirer's System of Culture." In Truwant, *Interpreting Cassirer: Critical Essays*, 34–52.
- Morman, Thomas. "Idealization in Cassirer's Philosophy of Mathematics." *Philosophia Mathematica* 16 (2008): 151–81.
- Padovani, Flavia. "Relativizing the Relativized A Priori: Reichenbach's Axioms of Coordination Divided." *Synthese* 181 (2011): 41–62.
- Pollok, Anne. "The First and Second Person Perspective in History: Or, Why History Is 'Culture Fiction.'" In Luft and Friedman, *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer: A Novel Assessment*, 341–60.
- Recki, Birgit. *Cassirer*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2013.
- . *Kultur als Praxis. Eine Einführung in Ernst Cassirers Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004.
- Renz, Ursula. *Die Rationalität der Kultur: Zur Kulturphilosophie und ihrer transzendentalen Begründung bei Cohen, Natorp und Cassirer*. Hamburg: Meiner, 2002.
- Richardson, Alan. "Holism and the Constitution of 'Experience in Its Entirety.' Cassirer Contra Quine on the Lessons of Duhem." In Luft and Friedman, *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer: A Novel Assessment*, 103–22.
- Ryckman, Thomas. "Conditio Sine Qua Non? Zuordnung in the Early Epistemologies of Cassirer and Schlick." *Synthese* 88 (1991): 57–95.
- Skidelsky, Edward. *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Truwant, Simon. "Cassirer's Enlightened View on the Hierarchy of Symbolic Forms and the Task of Philosophy." *Cassirer Studies* 7/8 (2015): 119–39.
- . "The Concept of 'Function' in Cassirer's Historical, Systematic, and Ethical Writings." In Luft and Friedman, *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer: A Novel Assessment*, 289–311.
- , ed. *Interpreting Cassirer: Critical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Wölfflin, Heinrich. *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*. München: Bruckmann, 1915.