

Konstantin Pollok / Luigi Filieri (eds.)

Kant and Cassirer

Legacy – Interpretation – Frontiers



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CASSIRER-FORSCHUNGEN

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Note on References

Immanuel Kant

All references to the first *Critique* follow the “A” and “B” paginations of the first and second editions (*KrV*, A, 1781/B, 1787). References to Kant’s works follow the *Akademie Ausgabe* (*AA*). All English translations follow *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

Ernst Cassirer

References to Cassirer’s works follow the *Hamburger Ausgabe*, abbreviated as: *ECW* (*Gesammelte Werke*); *ECN* (*Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*). *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is cited as *PSF I* (*Die Sprache [Zur Phänomenologie der sprachlichen Form]*, 1923, *ECW* 11), *PSF II* (*Das mythische Denken*, 1925, *ECW* 12), *PSF III* (*Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis*, 1929, *ECW* 13), translated by Steve G. Lofts, Abingdon-New York 2020. This translation follows the pagination of *ECW*.

Introduction

Back to Kant, Forward with Kant

In the general *Problemstellung* introducing his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer famously offers a revised and expanded assessment of the motto of the Neo-Kantian schools, first formulated by Otto Liebmann in his *Kant und die Epigonen* (1865). Cassirer's way *back to Kant* is originally charged with a transformative drive: the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture. Kant's Copernican revolution, granting a transcendental justification to the legislative domains of nature and freedom, thus also provides the conceptual tools for us to understand the fundamental laws of symbolic forms: from language to art, from myth and religion to science.

The specific traits of Cassirer's Neo-Kantianism should then not be understood *only* against the backdrop of Cohen and Natorp's reconstructions of Kant's philosophy. To acknowledge that Cassirer is a Neo-Kantian means not only to identify a specific version of Marburg Neo-Kantianism. Rather, Cassirer's understanding of Kant relies on a direct confrontation with Kant's works and should therefore also be considered in its own right. Cassirer aims to provide a reformed account of Kant's original concern in his critical philosophy: reason's capacity to establish its legislative authority. Cassirer thus transforms Kant's critical foundation of the domains of reason—nature and freedom—into an account of the possibility of all cultural formations.

From this point of view, we can see how Cassirer's way back to Kant is simultaneously a peculiar attempt at bringing Kant forward into the spotlight of the philosophical debates of the 20th century. Cassirer is not only one of the most scrupulous and systematic readers of Kant's critical philosophy, he is also perhaps the most innovative philosopher among the Neo-Kantians. For Cassirer, Kant's legacy is not merely a corpus of doctrines inspiring further developments in metaphysics and epistemology, but rather a fertile ground on which to build a novel and systematic account of human culture. Rather than advancing new solutions to old problems, Cassirer's pioneering studies raise new and pressing questions—thus opening up possibilities for us to both revisit Kant's own works and explore ways to adopt and transform Kant's account of the space of reason.

Hence, investigating Kant's role in Cassirer's theories of language, myth, art, religion, science, and even ethics as symbolic forms might shed new light on the transcendental roots of culture, its methodological traits, and its debt to (yet at the same time further development of) Kant's notion of the symbolic.

The keywords of this volume—legacy, interpretation, frontiers—are complementary terms identifying one fundamental aim: providing a philosophical, comparative re-evaluation of central aspects of Kant's and Cassirer's philosophical systems, thus restoring a genuine dialogue. Instead of seeing Cassirer merely as the historian of Kant's philosophy (which he, no doubt, was), or as eclectically introducing Kantian themes to his own philosophy of culture, the contributions collected in this volume advance a mutually illuminating account of Kant and Cassirer.

On the one hand, despite its wide scope and its pervasive analyses of the philosophy of symbolic forms, the recent renaissance in Cassirer scholarship has had little interest in Kant's philosophy beyond its role as a source of inspiration for Cassirer. On the other hand, recent strands in Kant scholarship—while extensively dealing with the most prominent 20th-century interpreters of Kant (Husserl, Heidegger, Arendt, Merleau-Ponty, Sellars, Adorno, Lyotard)—seem to overlook Cassirer's critical idealism, his transcendental method and philosophy of culture.¹ This disregard is even more striking given the recent publication of new sources from Cassirer's corpus, collected in volume fifteen of *ECN*, his *Nachlass* edition. The essays collected in *ECN* 15 engage in a philosophical analysis of the structural motives of Kant's thought, and represent Cassirer's last word on Kant's philosophy (except the 1945 essays on *Rousseau – Kant – Goethe*, *ECW* 24).

This volume aims to foster philosophical discourse at a number of yet unexplored hermeneutic frontiers: from the status and the consistency of our cognitive activities to their relationship with the positive sciences, from the nature and value of moral agency to the political and institutional challenges of the contemporary world, and from the dialectic between knowledge and morality to the need of a comprehensive perspective on the whole of human practices.

To not only restore but revive a dialogue that has for far too long been left pending and thus deprived of the attention it deserves, the research

¹ One exception worth mentioning is the work done by Rudolf Makkreel: *Kant's Worldview. How Judgment Shapes Human Comprehension*, Evanston 2021; "Kant, the Feeling of Life, and the Reflective Comprehension of Teleological Purposiveness," in Jennifer Mensch (Ed.): *Kant and the Feeling of Life. Beauty and Nature in the Critique of Judgment*, New York 2024, pp. 215–238.

interests of the essays collected in this volume revolve around three main axes.

The first line of research is devoted to Kant's legacy (Part I) and its presence and role in Cassirer's philosophy. Kant is undoubtedly one of the most widely discussed authors in the contemporary philosophical landscape, yet his contribution to the philosophical account of culture² that has been developed in the 20th century has been noted and engaged with only peripherally. By examining the legacy of Kant's critical philosophy—including its own account of the symbolic—and its driving force in Cassirer's system of symbolic forms that redefined and synthesized the domains of reason (i.e., nature and freedom) into a comprehensive account of cultural life, it is possible to fill a relevant gap in the literature.

The second line of research focuses on Cassirer's own interpretation, appropriation and development of Kant's critique of reason (Part II). The fact that Cassirer is the most prominent exponent of Neo-Kantianism has often been taken as a mere historiographical fact. Far less attention has been paid to Cassirer's appropriation of Kant's transcendental method that generated original results. Moreover, Cassirer's appropriation is peculiar because it is also a hybridization of Kant's method with two more holistic approaches: Hegel³ and Goethe.⁴ From a different albeit related perspective, we may come to the conclusion that Cassirer succeeded in productively intertwining Kant's philosophy with scientific disciplines such as linguistics and physics. His examination of W. v Humboldt and Einstein's works is as unprecedented as it is unduly ignored by commentators. To reconstruct Cassirer's appropriation of Kant means to both cultivate the soil of his various confrontations with authors other than Kant and to understand how he conceived of his own philosophical ideas by combining the main views of his interlocutors.

The third line of research consists in a philosophical confrontation between Kant and Cassirer connected by the following *Leitfaden*: the idea that our reason shapes the world we live in, and that this formation process is premised on a moral standpoint. In the recent past, Cassirer's philosophy has been instructively brought back to the center of a number

² For an orientation see Tommaso Morawski (Ed.): *Kant and Culture*, Rome 2022; Sabina Vaccarino Bremner: "Culture and the Unity of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*," in: *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 104, 2 (2022), pp. 367–402; Ana Marta González: *Kant on Culture, Happiness and Civilization*, Cham 2021.

³ See Gregory Moss: *Ernst Cassirer and the Autonomy of Language*, Lanham 2014.

⁴ See Birgit Recki / Barbara Neumann (Eds.): *Cassirer und Goethe: Neue Aspekte einer philosophisch-literarischen Wahlverwandtschaft*, Berlin 2002.

of philosophical inquiries concerning art, cognition, science and even—coming to the frontiers outlined in Part III—ethics, right, and politics.

While this attests to the width of Kant and Cassirer's philosophical horizon, we nevertheless currently face a quite paradoxical interpretive situation: two giants who both dealt with virtually any ramification of philosophical inquiry and provided us with views and arguments of epochal significance, are subject to almost no critical comparison.

The current collection aims to establish, fuel and foster a theoretical dialogue between Kant and Cassirer in order to highlight points of convergence and divergence; the idea is not just to compare and contrast two views on a given theme. Rather, the aim is to engage with two ways of unifying some of the most fundamental human interests, as both Kant and Cassirer reflect on the destination of the human being: to let knowledge and morality (theoretical and practical reason) interact on the very same field of experience. Since they sprout from a common root, they can be conceptualized by a single philosophical system.

The essays collected here are meant to provide new incentives for further studies concerning the relationship between Kant and Cassirer, not merely in terms of a revival of Cassirer's philosophy of culture but also, and perhaps more importantly, by bringing contemporary Kant scholarship into dialogue with one of the most committed and prolific proponents of critical philosophy in a complementary way.

Concerning the methodological framework, it is important to recall that for both Kant and Cassirer, reason is neither a metaphysical substance nor an abstract set of logical forms. Instead, they see reason as the legislative activity that grounds the world we experience and interact with. This functional understanding of reason finds its founder and first systematic account in Kant, and its restoration and advancement in Cassirer. Cassirer's aim is neither to single out some elements from Kant's philosophy to be applied to a new historical situation, nor to anachronistically and fragmentarily employ them as heuristic tools, but—more radically—to identify the constitutive elements of reason's legislation in the speculative domain of nature and the practical domain of freedom, and, most importantly, map out new ways of synthesizing them. At the very least, Cassirer attempts to make sense of the tensions in Kant's critical philosophy by taking them seriously and reconceiving them within his framework of a philosophy of culture.

Accordingly, we would first and foremost like to highlight the need to combine the historical reconstruction of some of the key issues in both Kant's and Cassirer's idealism with a critical assessment of the main theses and arguments, and secondly, to take into account both Cassirer's works

explicitly dedicated to Kant, as well as his key philosophical theorems, even though they come without explicit Kant references. Philosophical historiography and conceptual analysis may be understood as two distinct enterprises, but their differences should be seen as complementary. At least, this is how Kant and Cassirer have treated them, and we think that this view is equally adequate in our present examination of their philosophical confrontation.

Overview of the Chapters

(Part I: Legacy). Konstantin Pollok (Chapter 1: *On Kant's Critique of a Cognition Symbolica*) engages in a critical assessment of Kant's understanding of the notion of symbolic cognition in order to highlight key distinctions between symbolic and schematic-discursive kinds of representations—not only concerning their status and cognitive import, but also with regard to their scope of application. The outcome is a critical account of the symbolic in Kant to be compared to Cassirer's own classifications of the functions of expression, presentation, and signification. Birgit Recki (Chapter 2: *Von der Kritik der Vernunft zur Kritik der Kultur. Die Transformation des Kantischen Ansatzes durch Ernst Cassirer*) explores the transformative import of Cassirer's understanding of Kant as an attempt at unfolding the unity of the transcendental principles establishing the domains of nature and freedom, while also showing how Cassirer expands the scope of Kant's critical enterprise. Luigi Filieri (Chapter 3: *From Kant to Cassirer: Symbolic Formation as A Priori Synthesis*) focuses on the correspondence between key analogies in Kant's and Cassirer's philosophical enterprises and Cassirer's own turning points in his attempt at providing a new foundational justification to culture as the legislation of symbolic reason. (Part II: Interpretation) Esther Oluffa Pedersen (Chapter 4: *Transcendental Philosophy in Transformation: Cassirer's Reinterpretation of Kant's Critique of Reason as a Critique of Culture*) argues that Cassirer's notion of culture is to be understood according to the primacy of its function, namely granting the possibility of the constitution of all meanings—and not merely as an alleged addition of different subjects to the field of the investigation of nature. Francesca Biagioli (Chapter 5: *Cassirer's Reading of the Transcendental Aesthetic*) investigates the way in which Cassirer's interpretation of Kant's account of space and time both relies on the hermeneutical methods of the Neo-Kantian school and mirrors a specific interest in the advancements of nineteenth-century mathematics and mathematical logic that ends up informing Cassirer's own notions

of function and symbol. Tobias Endres (Chapter 6: *Cassirer's Determination of Human Perception: A Paradigmatic Example of the Application of Kant's Transcendental Method*), expands on the topic of perception in order to show that it is possible to rely on Cassirer's transcendental method—and the way in which he jointly understands Cohen's and Natorp's views—in order to further explore his epistemology through transcendental arguments. (Part III: Frontiers) Sebastian Luft (Chapter 7: *Cassirer's Transformative Reading of Kant's Thesis of the Primacy of Practical Reason*) reconstructs the implicit ethical interests in Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms and establishes a general framework for his ethics that matches Kant's idea of a primacy of the practical employment of reason in its connection with the speculative. Michael L. Gregory (Chapter 8: *Kant and Cassirer in the Natural Law Tradition*) outlines a comprehensive perspective on Cassirer's jurisprudential thought by comparing the role of law as a symbolic form with Kant's articulation of the fundamental principles of right according to the natural law tradition. Finally, Elisabeth Theresia Widmer (Chapter 9: *Cassirer's Kantian Ethical Hermeneutics: A Contextualist Approach to the History of Political Ideas*) develops a systematic, ethical understanding of political ideas and their history so as to argue that Cassirer's political theory relies on a Kantian idea of progress when trying to unmask and criticize the disruptive import of oppressive structures.

PART I: LEGACY

On Kant's Critique of a *Cognitio Symbolica*

In a comment on Cassirer's essay "Das Symbolproblem und seine Stellung im System der Philosophie" (1927), Willy Moog takes issue with Cassirer's use of the notion of symbol and argues that it should be taken in a more definite sense: "not every sign is a symbol."¹ In his response, Cassirer grants that the intension of his concept of symbol is wide but he emphasizes that this is necessarily so if one wants to cover "the whole of usages of the concept of symbol as they have gained acceptance in all kinds of areas of spirit (*Gebieten des Geistes*) and systematic philosophy" (*ECW* 17: 280–281). Yet this response might not be fully satisfactory. In this chapter, I will draw attention to the fact that Moog and others' complaints over the vagueness of the concept of symbol echo Kant's criticism of the *Schulphilosophie* usage of the term 'symbol' in a way that may shed some light on Cassirer's idea of symbolic forms presumably extending the scope of traditional concepts such as symbolic and discursive representation. Even though in the context of logic, Kant makes the same critical remark as Moog, "not every sign is a symbol."²

The German enlightenment philosophy from Leibniz to Kant is, no doubt, part of the relevant background of Cassirer's philosophical development. Thus, I will first introduce the traditional concept of a *cognitio symbolica* that Kant finds in the textbooks he uses for his lectures (1). Highlighting the importance of Kant's correspondence with Lambert, I will then analyze how the dichotomy of intuitive versus symbolic representation helped Kant to develop what Allison called Kant's "discursivity thesis"³, that is the first *Critique's* fundamental claim about "empty thoughts" and "blind intuitions" (KrV, A 51/B 75) (2). Thirdly, I will extrapolate a taxonomy of possible kinds of representation from Kant's critical writings (3). Finally, this taxonomy is meant to explain the sense in which symbolic representation is a possible means for us to gain epistemic access to the supersensible, but, with respect to the sensible world it should be rejected in favor of discursive, intuitive-empirical, and intuitive-schematic kinds of representation (4).

¹ *ECW* 17: 275.

² *AA* 16: 814.

³ Henry E. Allison: *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*, revised and enlarged edition, New Haven 2004, pp. 12–16, 78–82.

1. *Symbolic vs. Intuitive Cognition: Kant's Starting Point in Leibnizian Epistemology*

It all started with the epistemology of mathematics and the question of what sort of cognition we can have of non-intuitive entities. Leibniz invokes the example of a “chiliagon, that is, a polygon with a thousand equal sides,” where I “don’t always consider the nature of a side, or of equality, or of thousandfoldedness [...], but [...] use these words [like chiliagon] (whose sense appears only obscurely and imperfectly to the mind) in place of the ideas I have of these things [...]”. He calls such a cognition “*blind* or *symbolic*” and contrasts it with “*intuitive*” cognition that applies when we are able to “consider all of its component notions at the same time.”⁴ Immediately following this distinction Leibniz cautions against some misuses of symbolic cognition where “a contradiction that might be included in a very complex notion is concealed from us.”⁵ His negative example is the idea of God necessarily including the perfection of existence among its essences (i.e., the ontological proof for God’s existence “celebrated among the Scholastics long ago and revived by Descartes”⁶).

Following Leibniz’ distinction, Wolff in his *Deutsche Metaphysik* translates intuitive as “*anschauende*” and symbolic cognition as “*figürliche Erkenntnis*” (§ 316)⁷, i.e. figurative cognition, and explains that “in fig-

⁴ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: “Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis” (1684), in: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: *Philosophical Essays*, Roger Ariew, Daniel Garber (Trans.), Indianapolis 1989 (1684), p. 25. On intuitive / symbolic cognition in the Leibniz tradition, see also Avi Lifschitz: *Language and Enlightenment: The Berlin Debates of the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford 2012, pp. 39–64; he traces Leibniz’ interest in a theory of signs back to his defense of Christian mysteries such as transubstantiation, and hence focuses on theology, aesthetics, and history rather than mathematics which I take as the starting point. Meier-Oeser (Stephan Meier-Oeser: “Kant’s Transformation of the Symbol-Concept,” in: Helmut Hühn / James Vigus (Eds.): *Symbol and Intuition: Comparative Studies in Kantian and Romantic-Period Aesthetics*, Oxford 2012, pp. 21–43; here: pp. 23–24) gives a lucid explanation of Leibniz’ classification of possible cognition in the “Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis” (1684), but he does not touch on the mathematical aspect of it either.

⁵ Leibniz, “Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis,” p. 25.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ Christian Wolff: *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, Der Welt Und der Seele des Menschen, Auch allen Dingen überhaupt*. Halle 1722. See also §§ 286, 289 in Christian Wolff: *Psychologia Empirica: Methodo Scientifica Pertractata*, Frankfurt am Main / Leipzig 1738. On (dis-)continuities between Leibniz and Wolff’s theory of intuitive and symbolic cognition, see Gerold Ungeheuer: “Sprache und symbolische Erkenntnis bei Wolff,” in: Werner Schneiders (Ed.): *Christian Wolff 1679 – 1754: Interpretationen zu seiner Philosophie und deren Wirkung*, Hamburg 1983, pp. 89–112, especially pp. 89–97.