ERNST CASSIRER’S PHILOSOPHY OF SYMBOLIC FORMS
AND THE DIALECTICAL PROBLEM
OF KNOWLEDGE

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This dissertation explores the problem of how knowledge is possible, given that knowledge is necessarily rooted in the reality of the knower. The Kantian critical philosophy defeats Humean skepticism by demonstrating the *a priori* necessity of certain categorical functions at the root of all human cognition, but ultimately results in merely shifting the problem of certainty to these same functions. Ernst Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms seeks to extend the critical philosophy of Kant beyond the limits of theoretical thinking, and thereby broadens the functional foundations of cognition to include all symbolic modes of thinking in a unified system of human cognition. However, this expansion of the system of knowledge only serves to further highlight the fundamental problem of how knowledge of any sort can be a “symbol” of reality, when the symbolic form that produces that symbol always involves the mediation of reality in some way. This general problem is described throughout Cassirer’s writings in terms of a dialectic of spirit (*Geist*) and life (*Leben*), which, he argues, is the fundamental dialectic to which all other oppositions in the history of metaphysics can ultimately be reduced. In the present work, the nature of this dialectic is described and tied to the general problem of knowledge within any systematic critical philosophy, as seen in Cassirer’s philosophy as well as the works of Peirce, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein. Through this discussion, Cassirer’s own esoteric conception of a monadic metaphysics will be revealed, and the key importance of freedom as a solution to this dialectic will be drawn from his interpretation of earlier philosophers, particularly Nicolaus Cusanus.
Dedicated in memoriam

Cecelia Mary Hein 1919-2009

Albert Hein 1918-2014

Pearle S. McMahon 1918-2012

and Lois Kathleen Balaski 1946-2005
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1. The Historical Development of the Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer

The philosophical contributions of Ernst Cassirer to the understanding of culture as a manifestation of human thought are unmatched by any other philosopher of the first half of the 20th century. Cassirer presents a holistic view of cultural life that is astounding in its breadth and depth, drawing not only from philosophical traditions but also extensively from contemporary developments throughout the social and empirical sciences, and uniting all of these diverging currents within the great flow of intellectual and philosophical advancement of the entire Modern era. Throughout his own philosophical works Cassirer expresses an understanding of human activity as intrinsically unified, even within its diverse manifestations and apparently contrasting paths of development. This underlying link of all human activity is precisely its human origin: for Cassirer, man has no thought, experience, or activity that does not bear the intrinsic stamp of its internal source. The human being is the “animal symbolicum”, the organism that expresses itself through the symbols of conscious life.¹ Through an imposing presentation of philosophical, anthropological and scientific material, Cassirer powerfully justifies this fundamental

conviction with a vast body of evidence drawn from nearly every sphere of human life and conscious development.

Cassirer’s profound interest in the nature and development of man’s cultural being – of our human Geist\(^2\) – can be seen to closely relate to his own professional history.\(^3\) His deep interest in Kant led to his doctoral work in Marburg with the leading Neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen. Cassirer’s 1899 dissertation was on “Descartes’ Critique of Mathematical and Natural Scientific Knowledge,” and his main works of the next decade were dedicated to the historical development of the idea or “problem” of knowledge (Erkenntnisproblem).\(^4\)

Thus we see that from the very beginning of his academic career Cassirer was especially interested in the question of what knowledge is and how it is tied to the history of thought as a whole. Rather than treating the capacity for knowledge as a given, as an invisible and thus negligible ground for thought, Cassirer was deeply committed to exposing these grounds as an essential aspect of knowledge as such – and thus as a key to understanding the way in which conceptualization changes over time. This Kantian-Hegelian emphasis, in which the history of knowledge is seen in relation to the history of the conditions of

\(^2\) This term, important in Cassirer’s philosophy, will be frequently left in the German due to the lack of a word in English that would clearly convey the ambivalences of Geist as thought, mind, spirit and culture. Relatedly, Cassirer’s term Leben will frequently be left in the German both to highlight the dialectical nature of Geist and Leben in Cassirer’s philosophy, as well as to highlight the more technical sense in which Cassirer understands this term, which can be lost when simply rendered as “life”.


\(^4\) Most especially seen in the first two volumes, published in this period, of his Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1906–1907).
knowledge, is an essential feature of Cassirer’s entire corpus of work, though in these earlier writings Cassirer’s principal emphasis is on philosophical and scientific understanding.

Cassirer’s understanding of the relationship of knowledge and the conditions of knowledge in his early works are deeply indebted not just to Kant’s critical philosophy but also to Leibniz’ functional conception of the monad.5 His original philosophical works of this time reveal a growing conception of knowledge as a mathematical-functional system, in which the grounds for knowledge are to be understood not as specific contents of knowledge, but as characteristic means of forming and organizing the contents of experience.5 This functional-monadic elaboration of the Kantian category emphasizes an important element that is mostly dormant in Kant’s theory. This is the notion of directionality, such that each categorical function of thought leads in a particular direction, and thus generates a series of ideas connected by this function – a system of knowledge, at least from the perspective of analysis. While such a series can always be seen as a part of this functional system, it is not the case that a function must produce one precise configuration; this allows for the variety of intellectual development seen to arise from the same underlying functions among different individuals and cultures. In this way the manifestations of thought can take on various particular shapes, while the underlying function links them all in a universal, monadic totality.

5 The fullest discussion in English of Cassirer’s influences and developing philosophical conceptions during this period, including the particular influence of Leibniz and Goethe’s monadic philosophy, is found in Gregory Moynahan, Ernst Cassirer and the Critical Science of Germany, 1899–1919 (London: Anthem, 2013). This influence will be further discussed in Section 2 of Chapter 6.

This conceptual development paves the way for Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms, developed in the 1920s during his professorship at the University of Hamburg. Verene describes the heart of this philosophical development:

This model of the functional concept in which the universal element is held in an inseparable bond with the serial particular becomes the master key to Cassirer’s later conceptions of the symbol itself and to his sense of a system of symbolic forms in which the whole of culture is ordered in terms of its own set of functional relations, harmoniously grasped and portrayed by philosophy.\(^7\)

The universal is now identified as the form, and the products of those forms are identified as symbols to emphasize that our experience is never raw, unconditioned, immediate, but always a mediated product within a particular form of thought. What breaks Cassirer more profoundly from his Neo-Kantian roots is his emphasis on the historical development of this symbolic formation, as well as his expansion of conception beyond the theoretical-logical-scientific form. By Cassirer’s own account, this expansion was greatly influenced by the arrangement of the Warburg Library at Hamburg, which shelved philosophy intermixed with scholarly work on anthropology, mythology, and the history of religion: “in its arrangement and selection . . . it revolved around a unitary, central problem closely related to the basic problem of my own work.”\(^8\) In the introduction to *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer notes that apart from the theoretical thought developed and expressed in science and logic, we must also consider the important forms of thought revealed in language, myth, and art. It is not in one privileged area of intellectual activity

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\(^7\) Ibid, 14.

\(^8\) Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Vol. 2: Mythical Thought*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955; originally published in German in 1925), xviii. Cassirer’s indebtedness to Warburg and his library is further discussed in Section 1 of Chapter 7.
that our understanding of culture will be found, but in the totality of human culture in all its diverse forms. That very diversity must be understood in order for man to have adequate self-knowledge.⁹

The final decade of Cassirer’s life involved a series of academic positions in England, Sweden and the United States, after stepping down as rector and leaving Hamburg following Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor of Germany. This period was accompanied by a normative turn in Cassirer’s philosophy; his emphasis on the purpose and stakes of philosophy become increasingly emphasized in his writings of this period. Significant attention has been called to Cassirer’s 1929 debate with Heidegger at Davos as a key turning point in Cassirer’s philosophical emphasis,¹⁰ and Cassirer’s eventual assessment of Heidegger’s philosophy as part of the “intellectual climate of National Socialism” is rooted in this exchange¹¹. Both his original philosophy and his works on historical criticism are affected by this change in conception. Cassirer’s two principal original works from this period, his Essay on Man and The Myth of the State,¹² re-envision his earlier theories on symbolic formation as a self-consciously normative project. Similarly, his historical studies of philosophy from this period show a new conception of this project as not just a history

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¹¹ Verene, introduction to Symbol, Myth, and Culture, 41.

of human knowledge, as in his earlier studies, but more generally as a history of human culture, which becomes all the more inseparable from ethical considerations.

Neither of these shifts involves a radical reconceptualization of the philosophical positions that Cassirer developed in his time at Hamburg. Rather, his late works show a new ethical and holistic orientation toward this material, only possible after its prior formulation. The publication of Cassirer’s previously unpublished papers has further revealed that, while the events of Davos and Hitler’s rise to power were certainly important events in Cassirer’s intellectual and practical life, the concerns of Cassirer’s later years also developed out of his own conceptual analysis of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.

2. “On the Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms” and the Grounds of Knowledge

Ernst Cassirer’s posthumously published essay “Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen” (“On the Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms”)\(^\text{13}\) was completed in 1928, following the completion (but preceding the publication) of the third volume of his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. Originally developed as a conclusion to this third volume,\(^\text{14}\) the essay remained an unpublished manuscript until 1995. Cassirer himself describes the

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architectural purpose of this conclusion, and his reasons for leaving it out of the third volume, in the preface to the third volume:

The original plan of this book provided for a final chapter defining and justifying the basic attitude of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms toward present-day philosophy as a whole. When I abandoned that project, it was only to avoid making the present volume even longer than it is, and to avoid weighting it with discussions which, in the last analysis, lie outside the territory prescribed by its specific problem.¹⁵

Thus we see that in its conception this essay was a conclusion not of the third volume but of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* in its entirety. The publication of this essay is then especially fortunate for our better understanding of Cassirer’s principal philosophical undertaking, even granting that his own conception of these issues continued to develop over the last two decades of his life.

The title of this essay already signals the tension within Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* that the philosopher was now attempting to expose and, as much as this could also be accomplished, to resolve. This tension results from the ultimate logical need to ground any epistemological system in metaphysical reality in order to justify its completeness as a system. The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms presents such a grand system in that it intends to account for all aspects of human experience and culture as symbolic constructions of certain foundational tendencies of human thought. Taken as a whole, this philosophy does indeed encapsulate what seems to be a complete epistemological system: since, as Cassirer holds, all human experience, or being-for-us, is

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necessarily symbolic, the forms that generate these symbols would be the essential principles of human knowledge in their broadest conception. By exposing the fundamental features of these diverse forms through the analysis of their products, the forms themselves may become objects of knowledge. Cassirer’s epistemological theory is fundamentally Kantian: knowledge derives from certain axioms that are not just objects of knowledge, but are themselves foundational to the very function of knowing. In finding these foundations of knowledge, it would seem that a complete elucidation of a system of knowledge would then be possible. For if the foundations of knowledge themselves can be reduced to knowledge, the system of knowledge need not then rely upon anything other than knowledge. In this way the analysis of knowledge would reveal the existence of the foundations of knowledge, while in turn these foundations would be what make that analysis possible.

The essential problem stems, of course, from knowledge always being a knowledge of something, and while some knowledge is properly of the system or form of knowledge (Kant’s analytic knowledge), the larger portion of our human concerns deal with the knowledge of what is simply given (synthetic knowledge). Furthermore, as Cassirer demonstrates copiously throughout his works on the symbolic forms, the self-reflexive sort of knowledge Kant would call “analytic” is a very late product of human thought, prepared slowly through the development of the symbolic forms themselves. This world of human spirit (Geist) that develops within the symbolic forms constitutes itself primordially through its attempt to appropriate the facta of the world of human life (Leben); without an “outer” world of things, this “inner” world of thought would have had no practical reason
to come into being. As it is evident that we do not have such analytic knowledge from the outset, it follows that we have only developed such knowledge as an individual and as a species through a long process that begins, as Cassirer indicates, with an awareness of a living world around and apart from us.

Hence the problem that Cassirer must address is how to ground his epistemological theory of symbolic formation in a metaphysical reality, when that reality is only known through symbolic formation and symbolic formation originally develops in reaction to that apparent reality. Inasmuch as Geist is a part of Leben, Geist cannot be defined independently; that is, a transcendental epistemology grounds itself in a transcendent reality, but that reality is an in-itself, and thus the transcendent reality that forms the ground of a transcendental epistemology is not itself knowable within that epistemology. A transcendental epistemology must then in all cases be grounded in a metaphysics, and this metaphysics always and ineliminably eludes that epistemology in some way. This same pattern is at work in all other attempts to ground an epistemology through a transcendental deduction. Simply put, the complete systemization of any epistemology requires grounding its knowledge claims in a metaphysics that in turn justifies that epistemology as a correct interpretation of reality. But no matter how sophisticated the analysis, such a metaphysics must always remain fundamentally separate and ultimately unknowable, lest the epistemology fall into a vicious circle where what is “known” is only what has been assumed. Yet if metaphysical reality is truly separate from what is known, then to claim that what one knows is “real” would seem to be unjustified and unjustifiable.
This is precisely the problem which Cassirer must address in this concluding essay of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. That the work remained unpublished in his lifetime is a telling indication as to how significant a problem this is for the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, and how ultimately inadequate his attempts to resolve this problem are. Indeed, his fundamental analysis is that this problem is intractable – but the reasons for its intractability are at the heart of the project, and thus at the heart of knowledge itself. This problem, as we see, is not unique to Cassirer’s conception of knowledge. Any theory of epistemology that affirms the reality of what is known must also affirm the reality of a knower – this is the Cartesian *cogito* – and correspondingly the reality of knowledge’s formal structure – for instance, Kantian categories. The transcendental nature of Cassirer’s symbolic forms indicates that, even if Cassirer’s particular classification of the forms is somewhat fluid,\(^\text{16}\) the forms still carry within them the assertion of certain pseudo-Kantian categories of understanding, which constitute the formal picture of his system. The foundation and elaboration of these categories is thus the goal of Cassirer’s theory as a whole.

To successfully identify the fundamental forms that guide and produce knowledge, the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms must first be able to demonstrate the source of these forms in the reality of the knowing subject. From this standpoint, we see that Cassirer’s theory is more than epistemological: the grounding of the symbolic forms becomes a phenomenological project. Cassirer notably distinguishes his theory from what he calls the

\(^{16}\) In the introduction to the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and throughout the 1920s he identifies mythical thinking, language, art and theoretical thinking as the four symbolic forms, but in *The Essay on Man* he is inclined to separate mythical thinking and religion as separate forms, and treats historical thinking as a form in its own right; cf. also Section 2 of Chapter 5.
“modern sense” of phenomenology, as developed by Husserl and especially Heidegger. Yet, as Krois and Verene note, the original title intended for the three volumes of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* was that used for the third volume: “The Phenomenology of Knowledge.” Cassirer himself clarified his intentions in calling this philosophy a phenomenology: following Hegel, phenomenology is “the basis of all philosophical knowledge” and “must encompass the totality of cultural forms,” which “can be made visible only in the transitions from one form to another. The truth is the whole – yet this whole cannot be presented all at once but must be unfolded progressively by thought in its own autonomous movement and rhythm.” For Cassirer, the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms is a phenomenology because these forms are not simply ready-made categories of understanding inherited more or less equally by all conscious entities. Rather, these symbolic forms are constantly developing in human history through a dialectic in which what we know depends upon how we know, yet the “how” is in turn dependent upon the “what”, such that our development of knowledge is equally the development of our manner of knowing. The attempt to reach the “truth” of metaphysical reality is conducted through an ever-widening dialectical process of thought which seeks to appropriate more and more of the “whole” in which this reality manifests.

Thus this dialectic implicitly reveals the problem previously described: how can we “know” a metaphysical reality when all our knowledge is nothing but an approximation process towards that reality and our relation to that reality? The fundamental divide

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17 Krois and Verene, introduction to *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4*, xv.

18 Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 3*, xiv.
between being and knowing, Leben and Geist, does not permit of a final solution, but a historically-situated phenomenology of knowledge such as Cassirer proposes offers at least a descriptive account of how our different kinds of knowledge attempt to appropriate the “whole” in order to ascertain “truth”. By this logic, the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, as any system of knowledge, would itself be part of this historical, dialectical process. It will be useful, then, to clarify what is meant by a system of knowledge (Chapter 2), and then to briefly examine some of the principle ways in which the dialectic of knowledge has been developed in the history of modern philosophy before Cassirer (Chapter 3). Cassirer’s own philosophical treatment of this dialectic will then be examined in detail (Chapter 4), as well as his attempts to overcome the problems of this dialectic in his systematic philosophy (Chapter 5). This in turn will allow us to uncover the details of his own esoteric metaphysical theory (Chapter 6), as well as the role that freedom plays in the relation of Geist and Leben, particularly in light of Cassirer’s interpretation of Nicolaus Cusanus (Chapter 7).
Cassirer notes that all conceptions of distinction begin as spatial conceptions.\(^1\) Taking his cue, we may describe a system of knowledge with a simple spatial metaphor of a bounded region. I draw a circle, separating everything into two regions: the bounded region represents my knowledge – for present purposes we will describe this very broadly as my knowable existence: the entirety of my experience as well as all valid conclusions I could possibly draw from this experience. The unbounded space without represents all that is, but is not known by me: experiences I have not had, valid conclusions that I cannot myself reach. In contrast to my known existence inside the circle, the region outside the circle represents a reality that is unknown by me (Diagram 1).

![Diagram 1](implementation)

Now, whenever my experience increases, this circle correspondingly increases in size as it circumscribes more experience. Vanity may tempt me to suppose that this space outside the circle, which I encroach upon more and more, is itself finite; thus I would

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believe that with sufficient further experience the bounds of my knowledge will become
coeextensive with the bounds of all possible knowledge. Yet such a supposition is not
knowledge as heretofore defined, because it concerns neither an actual experience of mine
nor a valid conclusion to be drawn from my own limited experience. Knowledge of the
possible finiteness or infiniteness of existence lies beyond my circle of knowledge, and
indeed concerns an ultimate horizon of knowledge furthest removed from my own
experience.

So, reframing this problematic supposition as a question, we may then ask, is
knowledge necessarily finite? Or in spatial terms, does knowledge have an absolute limit?
Our answer to this question will correspond to different possible models (Diagram 2).

If the answer is negative then our picture remains essentially the same as before: the outer
region remains unbounded (A). If on the other hand we posit the existence of an absolute
limit of knowledge, my circle of knowledge would be inscribed within another larger circle
of possible knowledge, creating three regions (B): the inner region of my current existence,
a ring of unknown reality that I may potentially come to know ("reality K"), and an outer
unbounded region of an ultimate, unknowable reality ("reality U"). This unbounded region
may give us pause: is it logically consistent to claim that something is, but that it is also
unknowable? For if it is unknowable, how could we ever claim that it is at all? However, a
similar criticism may be applied to the annular region: if something lies outside my own
circle of knowledge, how can I claim that it might exist? That, again, would require knowledge beyond my circle of knowledge – something that both is and is not knowledge, and thus, from my own perspective as an epistemological subject, an absurdity. To speak of what lies beyond the circle of my knowledge is to go beyond my epistemological limits, as shown spatially by the diagram itself.

Inasmuch as this outer bound between a knowable and unknowable reality lies outside the circle of my own knowledge, I am not justified in speaking knowledgeably about it, and thus to assert the existence of a finite bound to my knowledge would be to make an impossible knowledge claim. Thus, if we strictly observe the limitations imposed by our initial definition of knowledge, we must actually assert an even simpler picture: our knowledge is a bounded region, beyond which nothing can be said. The existence or non-existence of what lies beyond this region is perfectly opaque to the epistemological subject; in fact, all we are entitled by our knowledge to draw is the bounded region of the knowledge itself, with nothing beyond (Diagram 3).

From the strict limitation of what we know, this diagram is complete. Yet I can still draw a circle on the page, and any number of circles or figures in the space beyond it; which is to say, I can still imagine the possibility that knowledge is intrinsically bounded or unbounded, and draw a diagram as if I knew what lay beyond my own knowledge. I can,
as it were, hypothesize that things beyond my circle of knowledge are this or that, that reality is one way or another. Breaking free from the narrow limits of deduction, for instance, I can make use of inductive reasoning, examining my experience of existence for regularities and then hypothesizing – beyond my circle of knowledge – that if this particular regularity is true, then I may expect (by deductive argument, supported by this hypothetical premise) that further experience will conform to this regularity (Diagram 4). And furthermore, when continued experience confirms this expectation, I can use that to reinforce my conviction that this hypothesis must be true, though admittedly this is by no means a deductive conclusion – rather, each new case presents one more example of the regularity that seems to be inherent to the world, both within and beyond my experience. And when it happens that a new experience fails to confirm this expected regularity, I am not doomed to reject the entire inductive process; rather, I am simply faced with a more complicated pattern of experience, which requires new, ultimately ad hoc adaptations or wholesale replacements of my previous hypotheses. As long as there appears to be a pattern to one’s experiences, a hypothesis that this pattern reflects some unknown reality may be constructed.
As depicted in the diagram, these hypotheses are distinct from the knowledge of our inner circle, precisely inasmuch as such hypotheses are not themselves knowledge but instead a predictive assertion about reality, which is unknown. Furthermore, the difference between the reality we predict through hypothesis (“reality H”) and whatever reality there is that we do not predict (“reality U”) is not here a difference in kind; unlike in Diagram 2B, where the annular region was essentially distinct from the outer region by whether or not it was knowable, here the distinction is fluid and inessential. This is represented in the diagram by the dotted boundary line, as well as the implication from the descriptions that reality H is only the subset of reality U that is hypothesized. The fluid boundary here further suggests that, unlike in Diagram 2B, there need be no final limit to what is knowable, and this diagram specifically asserts this growth of both our knowledge and our hypotheses about reality.

In confirmation of this model, we do seem to be capable of new experiences – and each conscious moment confirms this expectation. If we could extend our conscious lives indefinitely, it appears as if our experience, and thus our knowledge, would be unbounded. True, we are aware of the finality of death – that there seem to be other beings capable of experience and knowledge like us, and that such beings eventually die and afterwards appear to be incapable of further conscious experience. Yet even supposing that we were able to postpone death indefinitely, experience an infinitely long life, and find ourselves capable of an infinite store of knowledge, this would still not definitively settle whether we were capable of ascertaining all of reality – there may be experiences, and corresponding deductions from those experiences, that will forever fall outside of our circle of knowledge, since an infinite space divided into a finite number of regions may still be infinite in any
or all of those regions. Furthermore, unless it turns out that the region of our possible knowledge is finite, we could never truly exhaust it: an infinite minus a finite is still an infinite.\(^2\) In considering any of these diagrams, we must avoid the error of concluding that because the region of the diagram is finite, that what it represents is finite. Our diagram only asserts that the number of regions we are here considering is finite, and exist in the relationships expressed spatially by the diagram.

From the foregoing, we can now assess the possibility of an absolute bound to our knowledge in a different light. Again, what lies beyond such a bound is that which lies beyond human knowledge even in possibility. This bound then represents the hypothesis that such an absolute limit exists, which as hypothesis lies outside the bound of our knowledge. Such a hypothesis corresponds to the regularity that there seem to be things we cannot know about, but evidence of this hypothesis is peculiar: any new and unexpected experience would seem to disconfirm the hypothesis, inasmuch as the possibility of that new knowledge had previously been an unknown possibility, and thus suggests that we will be able to know about things we currently do not. But in fact, the hypothesis and the model generated from it remain unchanged, aside from a finite expansion of the region representing our known bounds of possible knowledge, for no amount of new knowledge will let us also know decisively that there is not still the further bound of possible knowledge expressed in Diagram 2B. Furthermore, understanding the regions represented in these diagrams to all be potentially infinite, a known finite increase in size of the interior region would not be represented by a change in the diagram we are considering. The growth

\[^2\text{Transitively, reality itself could only become completely known if reality is finite, or our capacity for knowing were both infinite and grew at a faster rate than reality itself could grow, neither of which seem to be the case.}\]
of knowledge represented in Diagram 4 illustrates this most clearly: an increase in knowledge within an unknown bound of possible knowledge leads to a perceived increase of knowledge, but understanding each region to be potentially infinite indicates that the left and right sides of the diagram are schematically equivalent – and thus that there is no discernible difference in the model of knowledge expressed after the expansion of knowledge, apart from our own experience of that expansion. In the last analysis, whether or not there is an absolute bound to our knowledge is also absolutely unknowable, but for that reason hypothesizing such a region is unnecessary, precisely because it will never exist for us. Further, even were our circle of knowledge to seemingly expand across every possibility of experience, the conclusion that there is nothing beyond our circle of knowledge would still be only a hypothesis following the perceived regularity of the lack of new experiences. So, even were we to attain all possible knowledge, we would never be able to know that we had – the very boundary of our circle of knowledge is defined by the possibility of an unknown reality beyond it, and thus the actuality of this boundary is unknowable as well.

Another possible model presents itself however, which has its parallels in cosmology. Perhaps our previous models are incorrect in their assumption that for the bounded region of knowledge to grow it must take its new substance from some outer region. Perhaps instead the circle of our knowledge grows as a self-contained entity, like a fractal operation that grows ever more complex without ever expanding beyond an asymptotic limit in size. In place of an indefinite plane beyond our circle of knowledge, we instead have the possibility of an indefinite growth within our circle of knowledge, without the necessity of assuming anything beyond this circle – as we have already modeled in
Diagram 3. Thus instead of an unknown space, we have an unknown future state of that space (Diagram 5).

But in this conception we have only substituted the initial spatial model with an equivalent temporal one – and as such we can model it spatially as well, by treating the future temporal state as equivalent to the region beyond our circle of knowledge in Diagram 1 (Diagram 6).

There is a conceptual advantage to this reformulation, for it highlights one of the most important features of the model: that which lies beyond our circle of knowledge is, tautologically, unknown, and thus at any particular moment all that we can say about this unknown is that it is nonexistent (as per Diagram 3). However, as Diagram 5 shows, that which does not exist for us now may come to exist; comparing Diagrams 1 and 6, the unknown reality of the spatial model is equivalent to the potential existence of the temporal model. The important feature in both temporal and spatial models is the constant possibility of the bounded region’s growth, however it is conceived. The regular pattern of this
possibility, confirmed at every conscious moment, leads us naturally enough to hypothesize that the unknown source of this growth is real – but to say that something is hypothetically real is only to say that it is possible, that it may potentially exist. Until and unless something enters into our circle of knowledge, it remains in a world of mere possibility. Furthermore, any claim we make about what lies beyond our actual existence is necessarily hypothetical; such claims are about what is potential, rather than about what is actual. Thus potential existence is equivalent to reality H in Diagram 4, and as the bound between reality H and reality U in that diagram is fluid, we may conclude that all reality capable of hypothesis may potentially exist. Whether there is some outer bound of reality about which we are unable to ever hypothesize is as unknowable as the absolute limit proposed in Diagram 2B – and thus, for the reasons already discussed, such a bound would make no discernible difference for our own existence.

Thus consideration of the temporal model has allowed us to perceive the equivalence of reality and potential existence. But the spatial model also provides an important conceptual insight obscured by the temporal model, namely that our circle is contained within a plane of possibilities, and as such is inseparable from and even grounded within this indefinite world of possibility. Furthermore, the temporal model shows that what at one time is only unknown reality can at another time become our actual existence – and vice versa, that our existence was at one time unknown reality, up to the vanishing point of the origins of our experience. Any knowledge we have or will gain is thus drawn out of this unknown beyond, and likewise all our knowledge is ultimately conditioned by this plenum of potential existence. Diagram 6 reflects this by placing the circle of actual existence within a larger region of potential existence, showing that our circle of
knowledge is grounded in a world of possibility. Everything within our circle of knowledge – our existence itself – is contained more generally in this greater world of reality, and each content of knowledge was once instead a part of this unknown beyond.

For this reason, we must observe that, conceptually, the spaces depicted are more radically different than a simple moving boundary would suggest, for the contents of these spaces are not truly of a kind. We might, for instance, be tempted to assert that whatever is within our circle of knowledge is essentially like that without, with the single shift in predication that what is within the circle is “known-by-me”. But such a claim is untenable – it would constitute knowledge of the unknowable, in asserting that what we do not know is in any way like what we do know. All that we can say is that our knowledge is conditionally grounded in this hypothetical region out of which such knowledge comes. The contents of this hypothetical region of reality, being unknown and at any particular moment unknowable, do not have the characteristics of something known, and lacking this, that reality to which our knowledge corresponds lacks the characteristic of existence. A potential content of knowledge might be of something real – there may be, say, a glass window behind the curtain before us – but until we actually have experienced it, its existence remains a matter of possibility.

This is why we refer to this region beyond our circle of knowledge as a world of possibility, but it is also, as noted, the foundation of our experience as the potential-turned-actual (-for-me, at any rate). To be able to say anything at all determinate about something – to describe it – requires that this thing move from the world of the possible into our circle of knowledge. In whatever characteristics it then takes, it correspondingly exists for us – an actual glass window, an actual idea, an actual mathematical expression, an actual
delusion, an actual absence. The token of “existence” in this context is thus nothing other than the capacity to say anything determinate about the thing, no matter how subtle or abstract that determinacy is. And to speak determinately about something is to express knowledge about that thing. True, something may be determinate in some ways and indeterminate in others – our knowledge about something may not, and perhaps never is, complete. Only insofar as we can speak of a thing definitively, through either experience or deductive reasoning, has it entered into our circle of knowledge. In whatever ways it remains indeterminate it is thereby still unknown to us and part of the world of possibility – potential, but not actual. To say that something is a part of the world of possibility is itself only a metaphor for expressing that we know nothing about something, it is to hypothesize about reality. That reality which is only possible remains for us nonexistent – potentially existent, but not as yet determinately so.

Thus again we return to the initial model. The previous investigations have demonstrated that this model is a sufficient account of our relationship to a world of actual and potential knowledge. But it also expresses the necessity of this relationship, trapped as each of us is within the boundaries of our own circle of knowledge. Yet, we do not feel trapped. The most basic regularity of our experience is that we are capable of new experience, for all that we have heretofore known was at some earlier point not known by us. As noted, this temporal inflection does not change the picture of our model. However, it does indicate that we have a constant influx of new knowledge, such that from our own perspective our circle of knowledge appears to be gaining ever new content. This shows us that our circle of knowledge is grounded in something beyond itself, for if new knowledge came from within our circle of knowledge we would know that it had. And while we may
observe that our circle of knowledge is also capable of expanding by our own power through the application of reason to the knowledge we already have, this does not invalidate the observation that our knowledge grows beyond itself out of something else. This most basic hypothesis drawn from our experience, namely that we are capable of new experience, thus amounts to saying that there is a reality beyond what we as yet know. By this hypothesis, we assume on the regularity of all our past experience that further experience will continue to reveal to us new determinate characteristics of things, and thus that the world of possibility will continue to become for us an actuality.

2. Definitions

It will be useful to clarify the meaning being given to the terminology presented in the previous discussion of epistemological models by providing explicit definitions. These definitions and their discussion will further clarify the epistemological model being advocated here, as well as the philosophical development of that model described in later chapters.

“Reality,” as already seen, is that which is potentially describable. Correspondingly, to be “real” is to be potentially describable. To be “describable” means that it is possible to articulate something definite about a thing; thus to be potentially describable is to be capable of revealing determinate traits – and this is reality. However, reality is not potential in itself – whatever is potentially describable is not itself just a possibility. But insofar as it is real, it is only potentially describable, and not actually described. For this reason reality is utterly unknowable. Conceptually we can describe
reality as the necessary ground of actual existence, but such a conceptual description is only the knowledge of a formal relation and not reality itself.³ Reality itself is not something known, but something distinctly outside of our current existence that reveals itself to us through that existence. It is the given of our existence, beyond our control and beyond our ken; it is noumenal.

“Existence”, then, is that which is actually described, and to be “existent” is to actually be described. To be “described” means to be revealed through determinate traits. Existence is thus always determinate – it is the actualization of a potential description (i.e the actualization of reality). Since actual description is always the description for some knower, existence is always the actualization of reality for some knowing subject. Existence is grounded in reality, in that it is the specific actualization of an underlying plenum of possibility. In this way existence always points back to that reality, but as it does so in actuality this pointing back is only a description of its relation to reality, and not reality itself.⁴ Such descriptions constitute “formal existence”, and are articulated in terms of forms, rules, categories, etc. “Phenomenal existence”, on the other hand, is all that which is described as an object of experience.

“Experience” is the actualization of reality; thus, what we experience is what exists for us – it is the reality that, through its actualization, is now described. Like existence, experience is always the experience of some subject. Furthermore, existence is that which


⁴ Furthermore, since the relation of a knowing subject to reality is something potentially describable and through this relation would constitute a necessary ground for that subject’s existence, this relation is itself real.
has been experienced by someone; to say that something exists is to say that I have experienced it, in some mode or other. The description of existence that comes through experience is “knowledge”, and is likewise the knowledge of some subject. Knowledge, as evidenced in the diagrams above, divides up what is described (existence) from what is not (non-existence). Knowledge only provides a description insofar as reality has been actualized into existence through experience. Thus knowledge may be either formal or phenomenal, corresponding to whether the experience was of formal or phenomenal existence.\(^5\) Knowing is itself an experience, and thus knowledge of knowledge is possible. Anything characterized by its relation to experience is “empirical”; anything characterized by its relation to knowledge is “epistemological”.

A “hypothesis” is an assertion made about reality that is prescriptive of existence, in that it establishes a rule for how reality can be actualized. That is, a hypothesis prescribes what may be experienced, and thus what may be described (known). In this sense, a hypothesis may be known in terms of a description of an underlying rule of experience, but this is not reality itself. Every hypothesis about reality (including the most general hypothesis that there is such a thing as reality, as seen in the diagrams above) prescribes that some particular describable relation holds. But the hypothesis’ prescription of this relation is distinct from the description of that relation (which exists formally), as well as from the activity of that relation in experience (which exists phenomenally). Thus no hypothesis provides a direct description of noumenal reality (which would be an absurdity), but to say that a hypothesis is prescriptive of phenomena is equivalent to saying that it is

\(^5\) Thus, one can experience the idea of a unicorn, and have knowledge of that idea’s existence, without committing to the unicorn’s existence in phenomenal terms; cf. Bertrand Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1919), ch. 16.
meant to be a metaphysical description of noumenal reality. Thus if a hypothesis could be securely proven, we would have a true statement describing reality itself. But such a hypothesis, being prescriptive of phenomenal existence, is incapable of being proven by any mere description of phenomena, and any proof from other statements of formal existence only begs the question of those premises’ own dependence upon corresponding hypotheses. Anything characterized by its relation to hypotheses or their corresponding rules is “hypothetical”.

Since any existing object may have aspects or relations that remain only potentially knowable (that is, hypothetical), the reality of an object goes beyond the existence of that object. When reality outstrips knowledge in this way, we may describe such hypothetical relations of reality as metaphysical. More generally, “metaphysical” pertains to the distinction of what is and is not real. Thus, metaphysical hypotheses are possible whereas metaphysical knowledge is not, since metaphysical knowledge would be an actual description of what is only potentially describable. For this reason, epistemology cannot resolve metaphysical problems (which is another way of expressing the fundamental problem in justifying Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms). For the same reasons, neither phenomena nor existence are metaphysical, while noumena are metaphysical (and, from the perspective of the epistemological subject, hypothetical).

That which is “formal” pertains to the hypothetical rules by which reality becomes actualized as existence for us, whereas that which is “phenomenal” pertains to what is known through the interplay of these rules and the “given” of our intuition. The

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6 We do justify our hypotheses using other hypotheses, but this is not a matter of proof but what Wittgenstein ascribes to the language game of certainty; cf. Section 4 of Chapter 3.
“phenomenological”, by contrast, pertains to the functional generation of phenomena out of reality, that is to say the transition from the potentiality of reality to the actuality of existence. Like existence, knowledge can be either formal or phenomenal, but not phenomenal – though both existence and knowledge are products of phenomenal functions. The hypotheses of reality described by formal existence are of those phenomenal functions which allow us to actualize reality in experience; for instance, Kant’s pure concepts of the understanding are descriptions of the categories, and thus the concepts exist formally. However, the actual functioning of those hypotheses (the dynamic, rather than static, account of them) is phenomenal and therefore goes beyond existence and knowledge. Thus the attempt to make a phenomenal function into an object of knowledge founders, due to its tie to reality. Epistemology therefore cannot eliminate or explain the phenomenal, because phenomenology provides the rules that condition every possible epistemological system. Vice versa, when viewed phenomenologically, existence is only an interpretation of reality within a given epistemological system.

To illustrate how we come to know something in terms of the model of reality and existence we have described, let us consider an apple. Phenomenally, we experience the

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7 This clarification indicates an important departure from Kant, who limits the predicate of existence to phenomenal objects of experience. In large part this is because Kant understands existence as a noumenal property, the assertion of which would be equivalent here to the absurdity of “actual reality”. On the other hand, the definition of “existence” given above applies to anything that can be described, which includes both phenomenal and formal objects of experience. In either case, existence remains the actualization of reality for a subject, which can only happen through the phenomenal function of a hypothesis of reality. Also cf. Section 3 of Chapter 3.

8 Or, to speak in terms of formal existence, because such a function is reality, and thus to describe it is to attempt to actualize what must remain potential.

9 Cf. Section 4 of Chapter 3.
apple in terms of various qualities – size, weight, color, taste, smell, texture, firmness, and so on, as well as through its interactions with other objects in our experience (for instance, we set it on a table and find that it does not fall through the table to the floor). This experience of the apple is evidently our own, and thus we are justified in claiming that the apple exists for us, and that we have knowledge of it in terms of all these descriptive qualities. Furthermore, we can consider the apple in terms of the scientific-theoretical form of thought, and increase our understanding of the apple as a specific example of abstract relations between objects, for instance as an object made up of smaller objects, or as a genetic example of a particular apple variety. The apple also has expressive meaning as a mythological object, and so our experience and subsequent knowledge may relate to the apple as a token of health, or of the dangerous temptation of knowledge. We further understand the linguistic representation of the object – “apple”, “pomme”, etc. – and the relations of those words in a whole structural system of communication. Artistically the apple can be considered in terms of its aesthetic appropriation and representation of any of these qualities as a self-conscious symbol. Even were we to later conclude that we were only dreaming of an apple, these experiences would still be our experience, and we would still say the apple existed – but as a dream.

And yet, the full reality of the apple goes beyond this; the very abundance of evidence in the different symbolic functions that we can apply to this object indicates that a full and complete knowledge of all potential descriptions of this object is beyond us. Instead, upon reflection, we note that our experience of the apple is precisely ours. And such a subjective relation is more than a list of attributes, no matter how long and thorough, because that relation involves us in the very activity of knowing it. The experience of the
apple reveals to us that it is only one possible experience among many, and that a further experience that will reveal the apple in new and different configurations of existence is always possible. The reality of this apple is a hypothesis we assert in order to explain the possibility of this diverse experience, in addition to a whole series of hypotheses we assert that model the various forms in which we experience the apple (including for instance the Kantian categories). That the phenomenal experience of the apple is wholly knowable is self-evident; it is a description of the apple’s actual existence for us, and includes the formal existence of the rules that allow us to experience the apple. But the reality underlying this experience is not evident to us. In place of any actual description of the noumenal, we only assert what we expect that reality to be through prescriptive hypotheses.

Metaphysically speaking, then, it appears that essence (i.e. reality) precedes existence, since the potentiality of a thing precedes its actuality. This, however, does not constitute knowledge, but instead is itself a formulation of the fundamental hypothesis that there is such a reality – the diagrams above represent similar hypotheses about reality’s relation to existence. On the other hand, considered empirically existence precedes essence in that the experience of existence comes before the conscious description of that existence in knowledge. But from the perspective of the epistemological system that is phenomenologically grounded in a series of hypotheses, the two relations are combined: essence is both the hypothetical ground of knowledge and also the goal of knowledge, where the goal is to increase our knowledge by actualizing reality as existence. Thus, for the epistemological subject, essence functions as the hypothetical telos of existence that is only discoverable through existence. In the diagrams above we may think of the bound between existence and reality as the location of this teleological double function of the
complex relation between reality and the epistemological subject: knowledge comes out of reality and aims to explore reality, and in both exchanges it is confined to an indefinitely limited portion of reality. In its grounding within the larger plane of reality, existence (and thus knowledge) touches upon reality as its hypothetical substrate, like the hypotheses of reality that allow us to experience the apple. But in its point of contact with this outer bound, experience also draws new content from the reality that lies beyond it. The expansion of knowledge then is the moving bound of existence, but as it expands it only reveals more of the reality out of which it came (cf. Diagram 4). In this way, we see that existence both precedes and is preceded by essence, corresponding to the double relation of the epistemological subject to reality.

Given these relations, we see that the essential query for the epistemological subject is not “what do I know?” but the pair of questions, “how did I come to know anything?” and “how do I come to know what I do not know?” What is essential is thus not that we know, which remains self-evident, but the temporally-situated questions of how we came to be knowing beings and how we can actualize ever more of the world of possibility into our known existence. Both of these are transcendental questions in their attempt to assess what is beyond the boundary of knowledge – and thus both questions are fated from the outset to failure, if the goal is complete knowledge of what is unknowable. But if the goal is instead an increasing approach to the unknowable, the expansion of our circle of knowledge within the indefinite limits of the world of possibility, then such researches may not only be successful in their aim, but may make us better able to contextualize and judge the merits of the knowledge we do have.
CHAPTER 3

EPISTEMOLOGICAL SYSTEMS IN MODERN PHILOSOPHY

1. Rules of the Game and Epistemological Limits: Hume and Kant

The first chapter concluded by presenting the fundamental problem of metaphysics in Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms as that philosophy’s impossibility of expressing any knowledge of reality, while nonetheless grounding itself upon reality. In Chapter 2 this problem was illustrated in terms of a growing circle of knowledge that circumscribes more and more reality actualized as existence, but without being able to account for that expansion, either in the past or in the future. Nonetheless, the practice of learning demonstrates that knowledge expands in concrete ways, and thus may at any point in time be regarded as having definite limits. Following Locke, the possibility of its expansion requires that there be space in which to expand – a blank slate within which to inscribe our circle – and thus the experience of learning is itself empirical evidence that there has always been a space beyond the circle of our knowledge in the past. But what prevents us from “filling the slate” and completing the Enlightenment project of acquiring all possible knowledge, and making existence coextensive with reality? Or on the other end, how, as Hume asks, can we rationally conclude from ever so much previous expansion of our knowledge that this circle may be expanded indefinitely and inexhaustibly?

If Hume is correct that we lack the proper grounds to inductively assert that what we have experienced will be like what we have not experienced¹, then our patterns of

¹ David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (London, 1777), § IV pt. I.
thought and behavior that stem from this belief are in need of justification. Kant’s system, formed out of his transcendental deduction, precisely attempts to achieve this justification by grounding all of our experience in experience’s own necessary conceptions – that is, by grounding our experience in those regularities, rather than by grounding those regularities in our experience. This is the “complete solution” of Hume’s problem (and Aristotle’s before him, as described in the *Posterior Analytics*) that Kant announces in the *Prolegomena*. But the rationale for Kant’s idealism is in turn categorical: the idea that the world is in any way regular in its behavior is itself a product of reasoning stemming from these basic categories. Thus, as Kant states, the principles of natural science which assert these regularities are themselves grounded upon the categories of consciousness. And it is due to our belief in these principles that we consciously act in the world, for they give us the necessary context for action. Consider: without those principles derived from the concept of causality, what sense could there be in interacting with any object that appears to us in the world? Or more fundamentally still: without those principles deriving from the positing of existence, how could we even conceive of there being some object with which to interact? The regularities derived from the Kantian categories serve as a foundation for our action in the world. It is by them, or at any rate something like them, that a self-reflective engagement with the world – and thus conscious life as such – is possible.

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Kant’s answer to Hume’s skepticism is thus that all knowledge built upon universal principals must rely upon those principals as something inherent to our very capacity for the understanding of that knowledge. Such knowledge is always and ineliminably our knowledge in that it is contingent upon categories of understanding which belong not to the known object but to the knowing subject. Kant further notes that our perception of the world is likewise contingent upon our ability to distinguish differentiation and succession (i.e. space and time) of things in the world. To say that it is difficult or impossible to comprehend how one would perceive or understand apart from these forms of perception and categories of the understanding is just to acknowledge that one is human, and not, say, a bat. But were one endowed with a different set of forms or categories, one’s experience itself would be altered, for in Kant’s theory we never know the things-in-themselves, but only the phenomena associated with those things – and phenomena always come to us through intuition or reason. Thus Kant fundamentally agrees with Hume’s criticism: we can never come to know the necessary or the universal (that is, reality) through experience alone. In order to make any claim about how the world is, we must first grant some rules (i.e. hypotheses – categories – starting principles – axioms – archetypes – language games); these we take to be certain, and from them all other knowledge is possible.

Kant’s solution to Hume’s problem thus comes at a high cost. The basic epistemological problem for both philosophers is how knowledge of things in the world is possible when there are no subject-independent criteria for truth. In fact, Kant’s “solution” to Hume’s skepticism ultimately extends that skepticism to include not just matters of fact,

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but relations of ideas and raw experience as well, by arguing that the very rules underlying all types of judgments – empirical or rational, in perception or in the understanding – are prerequisite *a priori* to any such judgment. However, rules are not in themselves knowledge (though knowledge of rules is certainly possible, which is the aim of Kant’s transcendental deduction). Rather, rules must be thought of as given functions or patterns underlying and ultimately defining some concrete situation.

To take an obvious analogy, one cannot play a game, let’s say contract bridge, without rules; but these very rules provide the conditions of possibility and necessity which make up the game itself. The rules of bridge are of a few different kinds, however. Before we even consider the rules as one might find in a book of Hoyle, there are preliminary definitions to be drawn: we have thirteen classes of ascending rank, each of which in turn belongs to one of four classes also in ascending rank. These fifty-two unique combinations must be divisible and distributable concretely, randomly, and anonymously to distinct entities (the players, be they human or otherwise), and later selected from a particular set (a “hand”) and presented to the collective of these entities. Each of these entities must be able to recognize the class combinations, and also must be capable of acting in accordance with the other sorts of rules yet to be described. A proper game of contract bridge further requires a capacity to keep score among the entities, though this is not requisite for a single hand; however, the rules of scoring and of strategy in contract bridge are interrelated, so it may be best to consider single-hand bridge as a similar but different game. The foregoing rules may be considered primary, inasmuch as they are themselves requisite for the

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6 Since a rule is equivalent to a hypothesis, this follows from what was stated in Section 2 of Chapter 2.
construction of the further rules of the game; nonetheless, they are *rules* inasmuch as they must be granted *a priori* to the playing of the game (these primary rules are analogous to definitions in Russell and Whitehead’s *Principia Mathematica*).

In the customary sense of the word, the normal “rules” of contract bridge come next; here we specify two sets of partners and their order of play, the shuffling and dealing rules, the rules regulating ascending bidding and prohibiting communication apart from one’s bid, the assignment of taker and dummy, the rules for playing and taking tricks, the rules for scoring, and the rules for winning. If the game is being played in the context of a tournament, other rules of a similar kind may apply. For simplicity’s sake we may refer to all of these as secondary rules, inasmuch as they depend upon the primary rules and dictate how those primary rules will interrelate. Note that the aforementioned primary rules are constitutive of any number of games (hearts, for instance). Similarly, these secondary rules allow for and even encourage a tertiary level of rules in bridge, known as conventions. Conventions both in bidding and in play are developed explicitly among bridge players, and in tournament settings must often be reported to the opposing partnership and followed exactly; in such circumstances the boundaries between these secondary and tertiary levels lose much of their distinctness. The assignment of levels is bound to be messy in many cases, and in any event is less important than being aware of the specific interdependencies of the rules in a game.

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8 The same can be said for Wittgenstein’s discussion of certainty in language games, where one confessed certainty conditions and is conditioned by other certainties interdependently, in the manner of a web (cf. Section 4 of the current chapter).
But there remains one further level of rules, which we may call strategy. From a given set of rules, which includes the player’s objectives, that player is tasked with finding a way to meet those objectives. In contract bridge, the player wants to outscore their opponent, or at least play as optimally as possible given the random hands distributed – a viewpoint fundamental to duplicate bridge tournament play, where each table of players is given an identical distribution of cards and thus allows the concrete comparison between teams playing identical hands. Inasmuch as a player is given freedom to choose between different options of play, they may optimize their choices to achieve their particular objectives. Bridge specifically rewards strategies based upon careful observation and problem-solving skills; an important goal of the developing bridge player’s strategy is to determine as quickly and accurately as possible the exact cards in all other players’ hands, and to choose the optimal course of action in light of those deductions. In comparison, the children’s card game “war” involves no strategy in terms of optimizing one’s chance of gaining all the cards, unless one is very particular about how they pick up their earned tricks (thus altering the order of cards to be drawn later); nonetheless, children’s enthusiasm for games such as these where no formal strategy is practical or even possible (Candy Land is another prominent example) suggests that there may be other objectives to consider than the formal one of “winning” – namely, being entertained. Such objectives are truly as much a part of the rules as those others formally discussed in rule-books, as they too must be granted as a foundation of the player’s experience of the game.

The foregoing example illustrates how a game is constructed from its complex and interrelated sets of rules. In this example, the actual experience of playing bridge is concrete, but all of the rules underlying the game only find expression through either
playing or describing that game (i.e. through experience or knowledge). But to say “I know the rule, and it is this . . .” is redundant when the rule is being demonstrated in practice; it is, as it were, a rule of language (a language game) that one only announces their knowledge of the rules of a game in particular circumstances (typically, when that knowledge is in doubt to others). The problem, however, is that there is nothing absolute about our knowledge of contract bridge or any other game. Bridge is a human practice: in its concrete manifestation we experience it as a matter-of-fact.

But the rules of bridge are no less human than the practice of playing it. The rules are, again, only the pattern underlying the concrete expression of the game, but, *eo ipso*, they are only ever revealed in full through that concrete expression. By the same token, we are in the habit of separating signifier and signified as both practically and conceptually distinct, but one can only ever be apprehended through its association with the other: there is no signified horse without some signifier standing for that horse, whether it be a word, a picture, or the animal itself. Even the horse would need some self-reflexive means of assessing its self (as a thing, but not necessarily as a physical thing) as a signifier of its signified identity as a horse. This is really nothing but the *cogito* – considered epistemologically, the assertion “I am a cogitating thing” amounts to the assertion that my concrete (because experienced) character as something which cogitates is the signifier for my mental or spiritual existence (my *ego*).10

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9 To call attention to one of Saussure’s canonical examples; cf. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court, 1986; originally published in French in 1916), 97 (standard French pagination).

10 In spite of the canonical translation from the *Principles* of “I think therefore I am,” Descartes expressly includes in the first predicate all activities that necessitate self-reflection, including for instance doubting and willing; see *Principles of Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* Vol. 1, ed. and trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; originally published in Latin in...
However, as Kant himself observes in his attack upon the ontological proof for God’s existence, the form of existence is not a predicate but is rather the rule of predication – which is nothing other than the rule that links a signifier to a signified.\footnote{Immanuel Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; originally published in German in 1781 and significantly revised in 1787), A592/B620–A595/B623 (standard German pagination).} Thus, formal existence is precisely what is invoked in the Saussurean sign.\footnote{In Cassirer, this is explicitly tied to the general symbolic function of representation; cf. Section 1 of Chapter 6 for a discussion of representation in Cassirer and how it is at work in all symbolic activity in his theory.} Such formal existence must be carefully distinguished from the “form” of reality, the former being epistemological and the latter metaphysical, but inasmuch as reality is only made actual in existence (that is, the metaphysical is only apprehended through the epistemological), the reality of anything always lies beyond any possible experience of the knowing subject and has no “form” – it is noumenal.\footnote{Kant provides the following definition of idealism in the first edition of his \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, which mirrors the criticism of realism presented here: “By an idealist, therefore, one must understand not someone who denies the existence of external objects of sense, but rather someone who only does not admit that it is cognized through immediate perception and infers from this that we can never be fully certain of their reality from any possible experience” (Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, A368–A369).} Thus, every rule, from the most \textit{ad hoc} to the most general (which is predication itself), is in its formulation an epistemological assertion. The \textit{cogito} is among the most important examples of this kind of assertion, in that it is used to justify the existence of the epistemological subject, but this only vouchsafes the formal existence of the subject. No amount of rational justification can distinguish between “real” existence and the daemonic illusion of reality (which, being experienced, is still existence), and thus the \textit{ego} or “I” described by the \textit{cogito} is only assumed to be real as a condition of the \textit{ego}’s formal existence as a cogitating thing. For this formal existence, which the \textit{cogito} rightly
asserts, is nonetheless ultimately subject to Kant’s criticism of all predication: being only a phenomenal association of subject and predicate (“I” and “cogitating thing”), it can never say anything about the reality of the predicated subject. Thus, the copula of the cogito only asserts the formal existence of this I-who-is-a-cogitating-thing, as a sign; the “real” existence, if any, of this entity is entirely noumenal and thus beyond the limits of epistemology.

It follows that the sign, which is the only connection between signifier and signified we have, can never itself be taken as reality, for this would be a connection of metaphysical identity and not of epistemological predication. It is the very lack of identity which necessitates the cogito; it is because this “I” and this predicate of “cogitating thing” are not the same that there is need to unite them as a sign, and thus to establish the formal existence of the cogitating self through the cogito. Descartes’ argument is intended to demonstrate what cannot formally be doubted, and he succeeds in this goal: one cannot doubt that they are a cogitating thing without falling into self-contradiction, because the rule of predication must be assumed by a subject in order for that subject to doubt at all. One might claim that the “I” in question is nothing other than the predication of “cogitating thing”, but this would be an equivocation. To claim that subject and predicate are the same either means to link them in the sign, and thus to affirm them as subject and predicate, or to claim their metaphysical identity. But this “real” identity can no more be claimed than the cogito can be doubted, and for the same reason: the epistemological claim of metaphysical identity assumes predication, and thus cannot be made except through predication. A fortiori, no claim of metaphysical identity can ever be made outside of the bounds of predication (that
is, formal existence; that is, epistemology; that is, the sign or symbol) and thus, in agreement with Kant, reality is entirely unknowable.

As mentioned above, rules in themselves are not knowledge but rather condition the forms that knowledge can take. This again is why the rule of predication is the most general rule of epistemology, for the possibility of anything taking form is precisely what is vouchsafed through predication. Thus the presence of predication is equivalent to the presence of formal existence. However, we must avoid another equivocation (actually the same equivocation as before, but generalized for all rules) which would treat the acknowledgment of predication as the establishment of a real formal existence (this being a *contradictio in adjecto*); that is, it would unjustifiably identify rules as we know them with the rules of metaphysical reality. In contract bridge, “to know the rules” means to be able to identify or describe the patterns and practices of the game, but such rules are only the potentially formalizable (and not necessarily actually formalized) elements which characterize the particular practice of contract bridge. Rules in this formalizable sense are structural; in the more colloquial sense of “knowing the rules” they are only a formalization – that is, a description – of this prescriptive structure. Correspondingly, the assertion of identity in the *cogito* is only descriptive, for assertion, being based on predication, only describes the formal existence of the epistemological subject, whereas the metaphysical reality of this subject cannot be asserted because it lies outside of the rules of predication. When one pretends to assert this identity, one is in fact only asserting a description of formal existence, because real identity, being noumenal, cannot rightly be asserted. Even in formal logic the identity of two unlikes must be accomplished through a form of
predication, and while we can certainly note the logical identity of something with itself, to state $p = p$ offers us nothing more than the formal assertion of self-identity.

Through this discussion we see that the relationship between description and the thing described is governed by the rule of predication. Formal existence is the description of the form of reality, but not its explanation, for the *explanans* cannot be less real than the *explanandum*, and formal existence is less real than metaphysical reality insomuch as the former is governed by rules that make the cognition of existence possible. This impossible sort of “explanation” would require us to be able to circumvent the rule of predication and voice the unutterable truths of metaphysical reality by putting them in the descriptive form of formal existence – again, the *contradictio in adjecto* of “real” formal existence. This very human desire to explain rather than just describe existence (the essential aim of the Enlightenment project\textsuperscript{14}) leads inexorably to Hume’s skeptical dilemma, for explanation entails causation of the *explanandum* by the *explanans*, and that can rest on no experience in the world. The realist position begins and ends by ignoring the essentials of Hume’s objection and pronouncing with the sanguinity of the whole Modern age the zealous ideal that, in truth, there is no difference between what there is and what we know or may come to know, that fact is fact and fiction is fiction; wouldn’t it just be the height of absurdity,

\begin{footnote}{\textsuperscript{14} In *The Philosophy of Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951; originally published in German in 1932), Ernst Cassirer describes the goal of the Enlightenment as finding a system of universal principles within the aggregate of interdependent facts, which thus serves as the underlying explanation of all those facts:

The method of reason . . . consists in starting with solid facts based on observation, but not in remaining within the bounds of bare facts. . . . [T]he facts cannot simply be coerced into a system; such form must arise from the facts themselves. The principles [of the system] . . . are not arbitrarily chosen points of departure in thinking . . . [but] are rather the general conditions to which a complete analysis of the given facts themselves must lead. (21)}
they say, if everything we experience were somehow different than how it appears to us? And so the realist mistakenly regards their belief in the identity of the formal and metaphysical as factual knowledge, when such a claim is not only non-factual but deeply nonsensical.

2. Systematic Development: Hegel and Peirce

The foregoing discussion of the realist’s failure to properly distinguish the formal and metaphysical need not indicate that one must deny reality and fall into some nihilistic or solipsistic trap. A transcendental idealism asserts with logical necessity that our experience is only phenomenal, and thus holds on to noumenal reality as a corresponding antecedent to our experience, which thus functions as both the source and aim – the *telos* – of our epistemology. But what the realist seeks to dissemble by subsuming any such *telos* within some spuriously self-given *episteme* is what the transcendental idealist must ultimately acknowledge and confront: the “real” represents for us a belief in the noumenal, which can never be certainly known.

The problem with an answer like Kant’s is that it says too much: not only does he understand the objective regularities of experience as a product of our subjective epistemological regularities (i.e. the categories, which function as rules), but also that these epistemological regularities are themselves fixed once and for all. In this sense Hegel

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15 G. E. Moore’s “A Defense of Common Sense,” in *Contemporary British Philosophy: Personal Statements (Second Series)*, ed. John H. Muirhead (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1925) is a prominent example of this attitude and line of argumentation. Though Moore’s position certainly allows that we can be mistaken about particulars, like confusing a mirage for reality, his overall position reveals a profoundly different contention about the relation of reality and knowledge as that expressed here that as noted ignores the essential aspects of Humean skepticism.
seems to advance upon Kant, by demonstrating (in the same vein as Humboldt, Herder, and Vico) that any such regularities of thought are themselves historical, in the sense that they are tied to a particular point of conscious development. In other words, the concepts are not static across human history, but themselves develop in an internally systematic process ultimately culminating in their own self-transparency. But in this way Hegel restores the very problem he tries to alleviate, for by asserting that his own system is the final system he still falls prey to advocating a “correct” static system which is supposed to be a final resting place of conscious development.

Furthermore, Hegel’s method of development does not so much reject the Kantian categories as it does challenge their conceptual self-transparency. Kant was all too well aware of their lack of self-transparency: hence his preparation of two editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as well as the *Prolegomena*, all trying to make his transcendental deduction clear. For Kant, the category is simply a part of our human legacy, but its corresponding concept is a product of human thought and the principles a product of those concepts’ application in lived, historical experience. Hegel’s system does not fundamentally challenge the existence of categories, which is not to say that he endorses Kant’s particular twelve-part description. Inasmuch as Hegel wants *Geist* to know itself, there must be some *Geist* to know and be known – another reflection of the *cogito*. What

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16 In Kant’s preface to the *Prolegomena* he expressly acknowledges the obscurity of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

It will be misjudged because it is misunderstood, and misunderstood because men choose to skim through the book and not to think through it – a disagreeable task, because the work is dry, obscure, opposed to all ordinary notions, and moreover long-winded. . . . Yet as regards a certain obscurity, arising partly from the diffuseness of the plan, owing to which the principal points of the investigation are easily lost sight of, the complaint is just, and I intend to remove it by the present *Prolegomena*. (261 in the standard German pagination)
Hegel demonstrates is that the concepts develop historically, and the end of this development aims at (and achieves) a conceptual self-transparency in which the conscious knowing is the consciously known.

This would make a convenient end-point of development, because if this is achievable it would seem that the categories underlying consciousness would then be identical to our conceptual understanding of those categories – or put otherwise, in the final state the distinction of category and concept would disappear. Kant, more prudently on this point, thought that we must preserve this distinction, and so his descriptions of the categories are of the categorical function while his descriptions of the concepts are of the categorical judgment resulting from that function’s application. For instance, his category of the Universal represents a functional capacity to take something as whole or entire, but the corresponding concept of Unity describes the judgment of something being a whole entity in itself. The hard epistemological distinction is that while the function is something that we experience in its action, our knowledge of that function, expressed in the concept, is always secondary to the function itself, and thus it is the category and not the concept which is regulative of our experience. Hegel sees Geist as capable of transcending this functional-judgmental divide, and in this he demonstrates what seems to be a fundamental drive of human consciousness: to overcome the merely contingent belief in existence and acquire the truth of reality, where “truth” indicates the knowledge of reality itself. That truth is seen by Hegel as absolute and inclusive of reality is expressed in Hegel’s dictum, “the True is the whole.”

But even in Hegel’s purest form of Geist we still have a

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consciousness interpreting itself, we still have the concept seeking to understand its foundation in a categorical function. To claim that these two have become identical is, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, a transcendental claim of the correspondence of the epistemological and metaphysical; to further claim that this identity is knowable – that we can know the truth of reality – is a transcendental error.

Hegel’s spurious identification of the epistemological and metaphysical self\(^\text{18}\) pushes the problem of truth to its tipping point, which in turn leads to Peirce’s pragmatism, to Nietzsche’s nihilism, to Kierkegaard’s demand for a radical faith, and to Wittgenstein’s rejection of strict logical positivism. All of these thinkers, in the face of post-Kantian attempts to overcome the transcendental limits of epistemology, were singularly concerned with the problem of truth, when “truth” is taken as a marker for the knowledge of reality. In “The Fixation of Belief,” Peirce outright rejects the attempt to distinguish truth from knowledge (i.e. “belief”) as an epistemological absurdity: “The most that can be maintained is, that we seek for a belief that we shall think to be true. But we think each one of our beliefs to be true, and, indeed, it is mere tautology to say so.”\(^\text{19}\) Peirce is here denying the possibility of any special category of “true belief” distinct from belief in general, because to demand that one’s belief be “true” is nothing other than the condition of belief itself. But if this is so, “truth” is divested of its privileged, objective sense and becomes nothing other than a descriptor of the state of belief. The desire for “true belief” is essentially the same Hegelian desire to transcend the epistemological limitations of the


knowing (or believing) subject. The problem is that a “true belief” that described reality instead of mere existence would require a view from nowhere,\textsuperscript{20} or what Thomas Kuhn calls a neutral observation language,\textsuperscript{21} neither of which is possible for an epistemological agent. For we always “know” truth as an assertion of truth, and assertion is itself the Kantian category that allows for description, so there is no assertion without some epistemological subject making that assertion.

In this regard it is significant that Peirce eschews any discussion of knowledge as an epistemic category above and beyond belief. To argue, with Plato’s Socrates, that knowledge must be both justified and a true belief is to confuse the consequent with the antecedent: following Peirce, the justification of the belief is precisely why we assert its truth, in which case that assertion of truth is conditional. This is in fact the heart of Peirce’s pragmatism, for if our conditions for knowledge are simply the most justifiable beliefs we can formulate then knowledge itself becomes a practical rather than an essential affair. “Truth” then is no longer a neutral modal judgment of reality that such-and-such a claim necessarily holds, but becomes the special marker of conviction: if I “truly” believe this to be the case, then my actions in the world will on the balance confirm this belief. So, while Peirce would not deny that one can claim to believe just about anything, the claim itself is only “true” inasmuch as the belief carries conviction for that person. With this we see that for the pragmatist the marker of “truth” has completely moved from the objective to the subjective realm: “truth” no longer pertains to what is real, but to what one believes – or even further, to how one lives.


\textsuperscript{21} Thomas S. Kuhn, \textit{The Structure of Scientific Revolutions}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; originally published in 1962), 126.
Thus in Peirce the separation between the epistemological subject and object is eliminated, as in Hegel’s final stage of consciousness; but whereas in Hegel this elimination occurred through the transcendence of the historically conditioned self-conscious Spirit (Geist), in Peirce it is the transcendental possibility of knowledge itself that is eliminated by denying to the knowing subject anything beyond contingent belief. In this regard, Peirce embraces the logical consequences of Kant’s transcendental solution to Hume’s skepticism, and indeed recovers the Humean notion that phenomenal matters of fact are ultimately known in and through custom and habit. Peirce writes, “The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit, and different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise.”22 All beliefs, then, are reflected in habits, and all habits are reflected in beliefs. Belief becomes inseparable from the lived life of the believer.

To claim, in opposition to Peirce, that these beliefs are not “true” in the spurious sense of being unreal thus amounts to saying that our lived life is unreal. Our continued habitual actions give the lie to this.23 Instead what we can say, corresponding to our previous conceptual definitions,24 is that the direct object of belief is not reality but existence, while the habits corresponding to belief are the rules that guide our thought and actions. Thus belief is identical to what we have called knowledge, while the habits corresponding to belief may be formulated as hypotheses of reality. This additionally


23 To assert knowledge of what is never experienced, or a way of life that is never actually lived, would much sooner deserve the disapprobation of “unreal”, and yet this is the very doctrine of a realism that claims “knowledge” to be a “true belief” of whatever sort, where “true” is taken to be something over and above belief.

24 Cf. Section 2 of Chapter 2.
follows from belief being descriptive of existence, whereas habit prescribes the beliefs that we can formulate. What is novel in Peirce’s epistemology in comparison to Kant’s is that here knowledge (belief) is not the fixed result of set Kantian categories, but changes in terms of the hypotheses of reality (habits) that one brings to bear, which themselves develop in step with the knowledge they condition. Peirce calls this dynamic process “inquiry”. This process is itself motivated by the existence of doubt, which is the experience that one’s current beliefs do not correspond to reality. Through inquiry, one settles on a new belief (and corresponding habits) in order to remove this dissatisfying sensation of doubt. Inquiry thus progressively rids oneself of beliefs that do not correspond to reality by replacing them with other beliefs that seem to correspond better. Furthermore, this process is not simply the product of dispassionate reflection, but as Peirce notes is itself a fundamental process of a living conscious organism. In terms of Darwinian natural selection, Peirce surmises that it is the utility of this process for the biological success of the organism that has led human beings to have the capacity for doubt and subsequent drive to better model reality in their beliefs through inquiry.

In “The Fixation of Belief,” Peirce describes four basic methods of settling inquiry and coming to new beliefs. Though Peirce is quick to point out the social (and ultimately biological) utility that comes from settling inquiry through tenacity (egocentrism),

25 Hegel’s theory presents a similar advancement on Kant in this regard, but whereas Hegel argues that the epistemological subject develops along a historical trajectory to a final state of self-knowledge, Peirce’s epistemological subject – and knowledge too – remain in a state of flux with no achievable endpoint, even though the telos of knowledge is reality, as described below.

authority, and \textit{a priori} reasoning,\footnote{Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” 121–22.} he ultimately favors what he describes as the scientific method as the most secure method for establishing justified beliefs. The fundamental hypothesis of this method is as follows:

There are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those realities affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really are, and any man, if he have sufficient experience and reason enough about it, will be led to the one true conclusion.\footnote{Ibid, 120.}

Peirce’s own definition of “reality” is that which corresponds to the set of beliefs which unlimited, infinite inquiry of a community of thinkers will settle upon.\footnote{“[R]eality is independent, not necessarily of thought in general, but only of what you or I or any finite number of men may think about it . . . ; though the object of the final opinion depends on what that opinion is, yet what that opinion is does not depend on what you or I or any man thinks” (Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” 139).} The reason why this community will settle on these particular beliefs is that they regularly accord with everyone’s experience in the given domain of inquiry – for science, this is empirical inquiry. However, in Peirce’s language this makes reality no more “true” for a particular individual than any other belief that person might hold with similar conviction, except in that the results of the method used to reach reality may be less susceptible to doubt than those of other methods. The advantage of the scientific method as he describes it is ultimately because this method is based on the hypothesis of reality itself, which is intrinsic to the very notion of doubt and inquiry:

The feeling which gives rise to any method of fixing belief is a dissatisfaction at two repugnant propositions. But here already is a vague concession that there is some \textit{one} thing to which a proposition should
conform. Nobody, therefore, can really doubt that there are realities, or, if he did, doubt would not be a source of satisfaction.\textsuperscript{30}

Thus one only forms new beliefs after one’s old beliefs fall into doubt, and doubt itself only arises when one’s beliefs fall into contradiction. Yet contradiction is only a concern because one has already granted the hypothesis of reality given above, at least within the given domain of inquiry. In other words, inquiry is only possible because one grants, as a fundamental hypothesis, that there is such a thing as reality at all. Furthermore, as noted above, Peirce suggests that this hypothesis is not simply posited rationally, but through selection has become intrinsic to the human organism – as humans, we may be biologically conditioned to believe in reality.

The inquiry guided by this hypothesis is supposed to lead in the long run to a set of beliefs that will accord most accurately to our human experience. But again, what Peirce denies in all of this is that we can ever have access to something like objective knowledge independent of our particular habits of thought. Even reality, as he defines it, is only the regularities revealed through experience, not anything known in itself. But inasmuch as this regularity allows us to successfully predict that which has not yet been experienced, it serves the same role as “true belief” would in the way we live our lives. Peirce’s notion of reality is, as it were, simply the most practically useful set of beliefs we can hope to have. What distinguishes habit in Peirce’s theory from habit as Hume understood it is that, due to inquiry guided by the fundamental hypothesis of reality, our habits are progressively refined to better reflect reality. What Peirce understands and Hume does not is the Kantian turn: Peirce’s hypothesis of reality is, like the hypotheses represented by the Kantian

\textsuperscript{30}Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” 120.
categories, prescriptive of experience. For the same reasons, Hume’s matters of fact are not elements of reality, but of existence – and likewise his relations of ideas, which are expressions of formal existence, and thus the description of prescriptive hypotheses of thought.

Peirce’s treatment of reality as a hypothetical assumption that guides critical-scientific inquiry thus further entails that our phenomenal beliefs are merely modeling (that is, describing) what is noumenally in-itself. This is epistemologically secure but metaphysically uncertain; it leads in the direction of universality, as belief aims at a reality that is “beyond”, but also grounds, that belief – again, an epistemological telos. But this universality of method never vouchsafes the actuality of this “beyond” because to do so would be to argue in a circle, treating existence as evidence for the hypotheses of reality that condition that existence.31 In accepting his fundamental hypothesis of reality, the practitioner of Peirce’s scientific method of inquiry must believe first and foremost, and without any possibility of proof, that our phenomenal existence reflects noumenal reality. What the practitioner gains from this is an epistemological process whose express goal is to line up our beliefs with the reality those beliefs attempt to describe by inculcating habits of thought that most accurately and completely actualize reality as existence.

While all methods of settling belief involve the habit of inquiry and its corresponding hypothesis of reality, only the method of science that Peirce describes purports to eschew any other consideration than this fundamental hypothesis, and is thus methodologically pure. But whether we follow the scientific method of inquiry that Peirce prescribes or some other impure method for settling belief, the resultant set of beliefs and

31 As was shown in Section 2 of Chapter 2.
corresponding hypotheses of reality must be mutually consistent in order to avoid falling into further doubt. Thus the set of beliefs and habits that result from inquiry may be described as an epistemological system, where the relative consistency of that system is a measure of that system’s resilience to doubt. That no such wholly indubitable system may ever come into being is revealed by Peirce’s acknowledgment of reality as the *telos* of inquiry, as well as his acknowledgment that the certainty of a hypothesis is not achievable by men: “Absolute certainty, or an infinite chance [i.e. relative frequency of an outcome], can never be attained by mortals, and this may be represented appropriately by an infinite belief [in the outcome].”

Insofar as a new experience may reveal an unexpected inconsistency in one’s system of beliefs, inquiry must be an infinite process – though, as discussed, a progressive one.

That Peirce understands inquiry as refining not just our beliefs but the habits that serve as guiding principles of those beliefs indicates most clearly how he differs from Kant, whose categories are static, non-progressive functions. But given that such guiding principles are equivalent to hypotheses of reality, it is interesting to note Peirce’s dismissive attitude towards what he calls the *a priori* method, which he especially associates with the history of “metaphysical philosophy”. The key distinction Peirce wants to draw between this method and the method of science cannot simply be that the *a priori* method makes hypothetical assumptions, because science is unable to progress without itself generating hypotheses. In fact, Peirce ultimately concludes the series of

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papers introduced by “The Fixation of Belief” with a detailed discussion of hypotheses and their refinement as the proper business of scientific reasoning.\textsuperscript{34} It is the lack of refinement in \textit{a priori} reasoning that Peirce criticizes, inasmuch as one advances and holds to hypotheses not because they provide the best model of reality, but because they seem agreeable to “reason” rather than to experience.\textsuperscript{35} If a hypothesis contradicts experience, or is formulated without any reference to experience, then it is not formulated in relation to the method of science – it is unscientific, or pseudoscientific. Such hypotheses will form an epistemological system, but there is no guarantee that such a system will accurately reflect reality. On the other hand, Peirce argues, the method of science presents a distinction of right and wrong that is independent of any hypothesis other than the fundamental hypothesis of reality, and thus is uniquely capable of modeling reality. That this is equally impossible must still be shown,\textsuperscript{36} and is rooted in the general problem of justifying any epistemological system.

3. An Interlude on Epistemological Justification: Malebranche

No epistemological system, including one resulting from Peirce’s method of science, is reliable as a model of reality. This is because one can only model reality by conforming hypotheses to existence, but existence itself is always in part the product of the hypotheses


\textsuperscript{35} Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” 119.

\textsuperscript{36} The full demonstration of the insufficiency of Peirce’s hypothesis of reality is presented in Section 2 of Chapter 5.
granted within the epistemological system. While Peirce’s theory makes an important advance by challenging the reliability of any system that is unable or unwilling to challenge its own hypotheses (i.e. systems developed through the methods of tenacity, authority, and *a priori* reasoning), he also demonstrates that inquiry is impossible without the experience of existence. It is through existence, whether phenomenal or formal, that the epistemological subject experiences the “repugnant propositions” that inculcate doubt. It is also only within existence that a new belief and habit can be formulated or experienced. Peirce does well in raising our awareness of the role that hypotheses play in our epistemological systems, but is too sanguine in his own belief that we can guide inquiry from the minimal assumption of the reality hypothesis. Even to the extent that such a hypothesis is necessary, it is not by itself sufficient for more than the most minimal epistemological life. Yet once other hypotheses are granted, it becomes impossible to assess reality apart from the actualization of reality in existence that those hypotheses condition.

Ironically, what we may instead reaffirm is that no epistemological system is possible apart from some set of prescriptive hypotheses (habits, guiding principles, rules, etc.), and that what constitutes existence within this system is in part a product of those hypotheses. Thus, no epistemological system is capable of value-neutral inquiry, for what counts as existence within that system always more or less carries with it the very hypotheses and beliefs that inquiry is meant to challenge. What we can say is that any self-consistent system will be free of doubt from the point of view of the epistemological subject who ascribes to it. Thus, claims of existence within a self-consistent system are unable to

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37 Cf. Section 1 of the current chapter.
challenge how reality is modeled within that system, as this would be existence itself. But similarly, no such system is internally capable of justifying its own hypotheses as the reflection of reality either.

The example of Malebranche is particularly illuminating, for in his work it is especially clear how the proofs for God’s existence, seemingly necessary to justify his system, are in fact superfluous by the time he works them out. Self-consciously following the same line of reasoning as in Descartes’ Fourth Meditation, Malebranche notes that our analysis of the world around us has shown, in the distinction of truth and error, that we only fall into error (in our perceptions, at any rate) when we make a judgment without sufficient grounds to judge correctly. On the other hand, the proper use of reason will only lead to truth, following the rigorous deductive method of mathematics. Our error is thus produced by our will to judge when it supplants this proper and certain use of reason, echoing Descartes’ first principle of inquiry that we only accept as true what is absolutely free of doubt. Malebranche further demands that we recognize our perceptions, judgments and so on as ideal, and that we avoid the particular error of judging that these ideal cogitations necessarily correspond to real things. With his idealism thus established, we need only grant Malebranche his conceptual identity of God with the world of intelligible substance to see that all ideal contents – perceptions, judgments, thoughts,


experiences – are the manifestations of God.\textsuperscript{41} The fact that we can fall into error proves to us the existence of our will, but as Malebranche explains, in keeping with Augustine’s doctrine of the will, this is nothing but a will to resist the natural impulse of those ideas that come to us, which are, as defined, nothing other than God. Since our unresisting natural inclination stems directly from these ideas, Malebranche notes that this natural inclination is tautologically God’s will, and we thus have the essential content of his theory of Occasionalism.\textsuperscript{42}

It is important to note that Malebranche’s theory of Occasionalism is presented as a conclusion of analysis, and not as a starting place, premising scientific reasoning as the standard of analytical truth\textsuperscript{43} (just as Schopenhauer does with his principle of sufficient reason\textsuperscript{44}). The most troubling aspect of Malebranche’s account is his assertion that God is the intelligible world, though in his philosophical analysis this identity is originally a verbal one.\textsuperscript{45} Malebranche certainly wanted to demonstrate the God of his faith through this theory, and it is noteworthy that he manages to recover most of the traditional Augustinian characteristics of the deity out of the consequences of this logical identification of God and

\textsuperscript{41} Malebranche, \textit{Search after Truth}, 230–235.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, 265–68.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 14–15.

\textsuperscript{44} Arthur Schopenhauer, \textit{The World as Will and Representation} Vol. 1, trans. E. F. J. Payne (1958; repr., New York: Dover, 1969; originally published in German in 1819 with final revisions and additions in 1844), 73.

\textsuperscript{45} Cf. Malebranche, \textit{Search after Truth}, 218: “I believe . . . that the only purely intelligible substance is God’s, that nothing can be revealed with clarity except in the light of this substance, and that a union of minds cannot make them visible to each other.” For this reason, Schopenhauer does not hesitate in asserting that what Malebranche calls God, he calls Will, for it is the function that matters, not the name: “Malebranche is right; every natural cause is only an occasional cause. It gives only the opportunity, the occasion, for the phenomenon of that one and indivisible will which is the in-itself of all things, and whose graduated objectification is this whole visible world” (Schopenhauer, \textit{World as Will and Representation} 1, 138).
intelligible world. Nonetheless, he spent much effort in fighting off charges of Spinozism in his later years for relying upon this abstract axiom of God’s identity. If there is a difference between Spinoza and Malebranche on this point, it may only be that Malebranche’s theory is accompanied by a real and living faith; in their use of an abstract definition of God to delineate and develop a philosophical system, the projects of Malebranche and Spinoza are more than superficially similar.

It seems obvious that Malebranche has engaged in a *petitio principii* in asserting that God is the intelligible world, and then reasoning from there that God exists. But this is not the character of his proof. Closely following Descartes, Malebranche’s proof demonstrates that God is the ontologically necessary source of one’s infinite ideas. It is beside the point to attack this as a proof for Occasionalism, for Malebranche has already by this point provided the logical demonstration of that theory; but it is also beside the point to attack it as if it were a direct proof for God’s existence, independent of that theory or our experience in the world. A decisive feature of his proof is that it begins with the analysis of experience; without that experience, there is no proof at all. This distinguishes the Cartesian-Malebranchian proofs from Anselm’s ontological proof, because while

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46 Malebranche takes note of the specific differences between his and Augustine’s conception of the deity in *The Search after Truth* 233–234.

47 This appears to be quite deliberate, as Malebranche first presents his proof for God in bk. 3 pt. 2 ch. 6 of *The Search after Truth* (“That we see all things in God,” 232–233), directly following the conclusion of his proof for Occasionalism that opens this section; the title of this section itself indicates that the theory of Occasionalism is primary, whereas the proof for God’s existence is only secondary support for it.

48 Malebranche’s presentation of the proof at this point is entirely characteristic of this approach, beginning with claims drawn from (a) individual experience and (b) the premise that the source of the infinite cannot be in what is finite: “For it is certain that (a) the mind perceives the infinite, though it does not comprehend it, and (b) it has a very distinct idea of God, which it can have only by means of its union with Him, since it is inconceivable that the idea of an infinitely perfect being (which is what we have of God) should be something created” (*Malebranche, Search after Truth*, 232).
Anselm treats existence as a logical correlate to the abstract notion of perfection, Malebranche treats existence as a logical correlate to our fundamental capacity to experience the world of ideas, whether those ideas be finite or infinite. Inasmuch as the *cogito* relates the *ego* to the intellectual world, the existence of both is a first consequence lest one fall into inconsistency and claim the non-existence of what is self-evident. God’s existence, then, is not so much proven as it is vouchsafed through an analysis of the experience of the infinite by a finite entity – which is the same analysis that led Malebranche to initially identify God with the infinite intelligible world of our experience. What is proven instead is that it is inconsistent within the system of Occasionalism for a finite self to experience the intelligible world and for God to not exist. A question has been begged, but it is not the question of the existence of God; it is rather the *relation* to God expressed through Occasionalism that has been assumed as an explanatory principle for our experience, which itself forms the heart of Malebranche’s analysis of experience.

What is significant about the role of Malebranche’s proof for God’s existence in his larger theory is that it demonstrates the dual roles of existence and reality in any comprehensive epistemological system. As noted, Occasionalism derives from a few fundamental hypotheses, three of which are fairly particular to this theory: (a) our knowable relations to the world, including our actions, are entirely ideal, (b) the presence of infinite ideas in a finite entity is only possible if they are the emanation of an infinite ideal entity, and (c) the infinite ideal entity uncovered through thought is what we call God. All of these claims are hypotheses about reality, and as such they establish a picture of the world within which an interpretation of reality is possible. For instance, if I pull a book down from a shelf, Malebranche’s hypotheses lead me to interpret this as an intelligible
act, and moreover as the emanation of an infinite ideal entity, and thus the emanation of
God. These interpretations, however, are not themselves hypothetical for an Occasionalist,
but rather constitute the Occasionalist’s existence. In fact, to say “I pull a book down from
a shelf” is no less an interpretation of reality, no matter how we construe it, though it is of
course quite possible to construe it outside of an Occasionalist system of knowledge. But
whereas there are many epistemological systems that are incapable of asserting God’s
existence,49 in Malebranche’s system there is nothing more self-evident, and we must agree
that God exists – insofar as we believe like Malebranche that our experience really is of an
intelligible world, and that any content of that intelligible world reveals its infinite and
ideal essence and our relation to it as our relation to the divine.

Again, the reason why God’s existence is not truly a matter in need of proof in
Malebranche’s Occasionalism is because it is directly evident in every experience
whatsoever – within his system, the existence of the intelligible world (= God) is correlative
with knowledge itself. And while (a), (b), and (c) are not themselves knowledge claims, in
that they prescribe how knowledge is constituted within this system, one of the first
conclusions that can be drawn from every single experience is that it is an experience of
God as the intelligible world. If we have described God as our experience then God
empirically exists, as per the definitions of knowledge and existence prescribed above.50
Of course if we do not ascribe to the hypotheses of reality postulated by Occasionalism
then the empirical existence of God may not be tenable, even if we still hold on to the ideal
existence of God (which we must in some fashion in order to even hold a discourse about

49 Kant’s being one of them.
50 Cf. Section 2 of Chapter 2.
“God”). In fact another way of expressing hypothesis (a) is simply to say that empirical existence is ideal existence, or at least the essential part of it, so the ideal existence of a thing will always be sufficient for the Occasionalist.\footnote{Malebranche provides an extended discussion of the uncertainty of a material world in Elucidation Five of \textit{The Search after Truth} (566–76). To summarize his position: “God speaks to the mind and constrains its belief in only two ways: through evidence and through faith. I agree that faith obliges us to believe that there are bodies; but as for evidence, it seems to me that it is incomplete and that we are not invincibly led to believe there is something other than God and our own mind” (ibid, 573).}

What also follows from the aforementioned definitions of existence and knowledge is that while the concept of existence is a description of a metaphysical hypothesis (and, in its relations to the concepts of knowledge, reality, and so on, represents a series of hypotheses about the structure of reality), the existence of something is not a hypothesis but the knowledge we have of that thing, in terms of our being able to describe it. The Occasionalist does not simply understand God as a concept, but in taking the book from the shelf describes God as embodying that action and experience. This actual, lived experience of God is not hypothetical, it is part of the Occasentialist’s existence. And we cannot object to it from within their worldview (“paradigm” would be quite appropriate here), because it is fully consistent with the system of hypotheses that makes up this worldview; this is how God exists for them. Malebranche’s system is self-consistent, and the rhetorical purpose of the proof for God’s existence is to show this.\footnote{Cf. footnote 47 above.} It is not the existence of God (or of anything else) that one may usefully challenge, because the Occasentialist knows this. Rather, it is the Occasentialist’s view of reality that must be challenged, by questioning them on their fundamental hypotheses that guide the whole
epistemological system. One may be able to change an Occasionalist’s mind, but to do so requires convincing them of a new model of reality, not denying what currently constitutes their existence. As Kuhn would say, a conversion of this sort is possible, but it “is not the sort of battle than can be resolved by proofs.” If one is successful, the Occasionalist will now have a different model of reality (implicitly or explicitly), and in turn a different standard for what constitutes knowledge and existence.

What becomes clear through considering the role of the proof for God’s existence in Malebranche’s system is that existence does not justify systems of hypotheses, but is justified by them. Malebranche’s proof for God’s existence shows that the existence of God in his system is not a hypothesis but is known through his hypotheses – which includes the hypothesis that the infinite ideal entity uncovered through thought is God. The existence of God cannot justify this hypothetical identification, because it is the hypothetical possibility of describing the infinite ideal entity as God that allows the Occasionalist to know that God exists. And what is true for Malebranche’s system is equally true for any other self-consistent epistemological system: within the system formed from a particular set of hypotheses about reality, the epistemological subject’s existence will be the product of that particular set of hypotheses, and thus cannot be used to justify that system’s hypothetical model of reality without begging the question. But on the other

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53 Kant himself issues such a challenge in his *Inaugural Dissertation of 1770*, trans. William J. Eckoff (New York, 1894):

Of course the human mind is not affected by external things, and the world does not lie open to its insight infinitely. . . . [I]t seems more cautious to hug the shore of the cognitions granted to us by the mediocrity of our intellect than to be carried out upon the high seas of such mystical investigations, like Malebranche, whose opinion that we see all things in God is pretty nearly what here has been expounded. (73–74 in this edition)

54 Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 148.
hand, the experience that reveals existence to us is only possible by virtue of the hypothetical model of reality that conditions that experience. Thus, while we only have experience and knowledge of existence through an epistemological system, such systems can never justify their own model of reality. Existence, then, is merely the interpretation of reality, and the act of interpretation is epistemologically inescapable.

4. Existence as the Interpretation of Reality: Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein

To say that the act of interpretation is epistemologically inescapable is as much to say, in terms of the definitions presented in Section 2 of Chapter 2, that a hypothesis is nothing other than a rule of interpretation, and that all epistemological systems are formed out of a set of such hypotheses. This is not to say that the epistemological subject need be aware of or even able to describe this set of hypotheses, but to do so is to express formal knowledge of the rules of that epistemological system. Such formal knowledge is distinct from the actual function of these rules, in precisely the manner by which the function and description of the Kantian categories are distinct.55 We can say that a hypothesis of reality is formally knowable as a rule of interpretation, but in its actual function it is “interpretive”. Experience, then, is the interpreting of reality, which is to say that actualizing reality is the act of interpretation. The act of interpretation is distinct from the product of that act, interpretation qua fact: the interpretation of reality in this latter sense is existence. Existence, being the interpretation of reality, is always linked to an interpreter, who is the epistemological subject. Knowledge, finally, is this interpreter’s self-reflexive awareness

55 Cf. Section 1 of the current chapter.
of the interpretation that constitutes the interpreter’s existence. Put otherwise, the
description of existence (knowledge) is the self-conscious interpretation of reality.

In this light, knowledge is always interpretive. This is fully in keeping with Kant,
as the above clarifications indicate, since interpretation is the act by which empirical
phenomena is produced from noumenal reality. The full implications of this are that
knowledge, being interpretive, is always bound to and conditioned by certain rules of
cognition, and thus always points beyond experience to the reality expressed by those
interpretive rules. But the connotation of “interpretation” is of something tied not just to
cognition in general, but to the individual epistemological subject, and in this sense
“interpretation” represents Peirce’s advance upon the Kantian system (expressed in part,
as we have seen, through the different connotations of “knowledge” and “belief”). The
example of Malebranche’s Occasionalism further demonstrates how an epistemological
system generates its own characteristic existence, and that such an existence will be distinct
from the existence of those with different epistemological systems. Furthermore, as we
have seen in Peirce, an epistemological system is not an essential feature of a subject, but
something that can change and progress through the process of inquiry. This expresses
another important connotation of “interpretation”, namely that it reflects a possibility
among possibilities, that at some level – perhaps at times an unconscious one – it represents
a choice.

Of course, to treat epistemology as merely the subject’s choice for one potential
description of the world among many may be seen as a disservice to the fundamental drive
of epistemology, namely the drive to describe the one ultimate reality. Furthermore, every
conscious subject posits an epistemological system, and only within that system is the
subject able to experience existence. It is the exception, not the rule, that one experiences their existence as anything like a “choice”, for the simple reason that one cannot wholly step outside of their systematically conditioned experience. Peirce indicates the possibility of this through inquiry, but, as noted in the case of the Occasionalist, we cannot always count on the experience of existence to give us cause for doubt. The Occasionalist does not find grounds for doubting Occasionalism, because that system is self-consistent. For the same reason, the Occasionalist does not perceive Occasionalism as a choice – inasmuch as they believe in it, Occasionalism is the truth. But the presence of other epistemological systems – other paradigms of thought – is itself evidence that there is no universal system,\(^{56}\) and despite our tautological preference for our own paradigm, there is again nothing in this preference that can justify it as the certainly correct model of reality.

However, this criticism of the non-universality of epistemological systems cannot wholly undo the rationale for systemizing as such. Nietzsche, perhaps the most vociferous critic of systems of knowledge, also takes pains to express the importance of such “lies” for the sake of human life. Much like Hume’s description of habit as unproven but indispensable for life, Nietzsche argues that it is mankind’s unjustified interpretation of the world in terms of comprehensible and predictable rules that allows mankind to live at all:

> We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we can live – by postulating bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith nobody now could endure life.

\(^{56}\) It is the acknowledgment of others’ different beliefs that, according to Peirce, force us to challenge the non-scientific methods of belief: the method of tenacity is overcome by the acknowledgement that other individuals hold different beliefs; the method of authority is overcome by the acknowledgement that other communities hold different beliefs; the \textit{a priori} method is overcome by the acknowledgement that other epistemological systems hold different hypotheses, and hence different beliefs. Cf. Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” 116–120.
But that does not prove them. Life is no argument. The conditions of life might include error.57

In Beyond Good and Evil he extends the point even as far as the Kantian categories: the important question to ask, he tells us, is not how but why synthetic judgments a priori are necessary – that is, why “such judgments must be believed to be true, for the sake of the preservation of creatures like ourselves.” His own quick reply is that “the belief in their truth is necessary, as a foreground belief and visual evidence belonging to the perspective optics of life.”58 In other words, we as human beings need to hypothesize a regular, predictable universe in order to have any experience at all, which is Kant’s argument.

Ironically, Nietzsche’s apparent criticism of Kant in this regard is equally his expression of Kant’s immense importance; as we saw in Section 1, Kant’s apparent solution to Humean skepticism also extended that skepticism to the whole of experience. Nietzsche notes Kant’s optimism that through his transcendental deduction he has saved science’s capacity to explain reality, but in fact, as Nietzsche shows, the ultimate result of Kant’s theory is precisely the opposite:

How should explanations be at all possible when we first turn everything into an image, our image! It will do to consider science as an attempt to humanize things as faithfully as possible; as we describe things and their one-after-another, we learn how to describe ourselves more and more precisely.59


Scientific explanation in Nietzsche’s view is mankind’s need to ground knowledge in reality – to ground existence in hypothesis – but the problem is that explanation is thus contingent upon interpretation, and with it the interpreting subject. The ineluctability of this problem is expressed in Nietzsche’s account of the perspectival character of all existence:

How far the perspective character of existence extends or indeed whether existence has any other character than this; whether existence without interpretation, without “sense,” does not become “nonsense”; whether, on the other hand, all existence is not essentially actively engaged in interpretation – that cannot be decided even by the most industrious and most scrupulously conscientious analysis and self-examination of the intellect; for in the course of this analysis the human intellect cannot avoid seeing itself in its own perspectives, and only in these.60

The “new infinite” in the title of this section refers back to § 124 (“In the horizon of the infinite.”) and § 125 (“The madman.”) of The Gay Science, and reveals that Nietzsche’s perspectivism is intimately tied to his theme of the death of God pronounced by the madman of § 125.61 In §109 (“Let us beware.”), Nietzsche describes the variety of ways in which mankind attempts to explain the universe as the “shadows of God” (which “we still have to vanquish,” as he states in the end of § 108).62 Nietzsche further states that the death of God means that “the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable.”63 From all of this, we see that perspectivism is the consequence of the death of God and his shadows – which is to say, that the belief in absolute truth, or in a describable metaphysical reality, has become unbelievable. This is precisely counter to the scientific spirit that Kant

60 Ibid, 336 (§ 374: “Our new ‘infinite’.”).
61 Ibid, 180–82.
63 Ibid, 279 (§ 343: “The meaning of our cheerfulness.”).
meant to save, but as Nietzsche remarks, “science also rests on a faith; there simply is no science ‘without presuppositions’. Such a faith, Nietzsche continues, is the basic faith in the metaphysical – which is nothing other than the fundamental hypothesis of reality in Peirce’s method of science.

The theoretical conclusions of Peirce and Nietzsche thus share more than a passing similarity. Nietzsche’s perspectivism denies that there need be any reality corresponding to our experience, but then again so does Peirce’s pragmatism: reality is explicitly expressed as a hypothesis to guide inquiry, but never an achievable content of experience. The key distinction between the epistemologies of Nietzsche and Peirce is that Peirce holds to the basic hypothesis of reality as a guiding principle for all inquiry, whereas Nietzsche rejects the preference for any one perspective over any other:

[W]e are at least far from the ridiculous immodesty that would be involved in decreeing from our corner that perspectives are permitted only from this corner. Rather has the world become "infinite" for us all over again, inasmuch as we cannot reject the possibility that it may include infinite interpretations.

The implication of perspectivism is that, unlike in Peirce’s pragmatism, we have no grounds for dismissing some other epistemological perspective just because we do not share it. The attainment of reality – the world, in all its actualizations in existence – has become an infinite task, but rather than purifying our method of inquiry as in Peirce’s method of science, Nietzsche demands that we open ourselves up to any and every method of inquiry, which are infinite in number. While neither philosopher makes the epistemological error of asserting the existence of reality, both still trace out what a reality,

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64 Ibid, 281 (§ 344: “How we, too, are still pious.”)

65 Ibid, 336 (§ 374: “Our new ‘infinite’.”).
if there is any, would be like. For Peirce, it will be regular and rule-bound, and identical for all; for Nietzsche, reality will be an open plenum of interpretive possibility in which every perspective creates its own interpretation.

This distinction is paralleled in the division of objective and subjective truth in Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Kierkegaard (or at least his pseudonymous persona of Johannes Climacus) describes the objective mode of reflection as leading to objective truth by divesting truth of its particular interest to the subject, leaving truth as something “indifferent”[^66^], whereas the subjective mode of reflection inversely leads to subjective truth by divesting truth of its abstract quality and heightening the relation to the subject[^67^]. Peirce’s method of science engages in objective reflection, in that one’s beliefs are shaped by what corresponds to a reality that is hypothesized to be independent of the subject; it is expressly what the community, not the individual, will believe in the long run that counts. Peirce does not make the mistake of Hegel in trying to make subjective and objective truth correspond (of which Climacus is critical), but inasmuch as inquiry leads in the direction of one kind of truth or the other, Peirce favors objective truth as the proper goal of pure (i.e. scientific) inquiry. That such a truth is “an approximation that never ends”[^68^] only expresses what Peirce himself observes as the infinite nature of scientific inquiry. Nietzsche, on the other hand, strongly emphasizes the individual’s interpretation in perspectivism, and is critical of all attempts to formulate


[^67^]: Ibid, 196.

[^68^]: Ibid, 201.
abstract, objective truth as if it were possible to eliminate the subjectivity inherent to knowledge.

As Climacus goes on to say, objective reflection does not focus on the relation of the subject to the object, but rather on the truth, i.e. the correspondence to reality, of that object. Subjective reflection, on the other hand, focuses on the relation of the subject to the object, and places the truth, i.e. the reality, in the relation itself. The impossibility of ever attaining the first sort of truth has been described (though, as noted by Peirce, even here all that truth means is that our belief in the correspondence of the object to reality is free of doubt). Achieving subjective certainty, on the other hand, should always in principle be possible – it corresponds to accepting how we model reality according to our hypotheses – but in practice this requires the subject to affirm what cannot be known. For inasmuch as the “how” of subjective truth is the manner in which we prescribe our potential knowledge, we cannot “know” that our prescriptions are true descriptions of reality. Yet again, this is the impossibility of justifying the rules of an epistemological system through existence. Instead of such a justification, subjective truth requires a different means of resolving the uncertainty of the subject. This resolution comes from taking the “leap” and embracing these hypotheses by faith. Faith, as Climacus characteristically defines it, is “the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty,” but it is also enigmatically called the “category of despair.”

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69 Ibid, 199.

70 As demonstrated in Section 2 of Chapter 2.

71 Ibid, 204.

72 Ibid, 200 note.
This enigma is entered into by considering the description of despair given in *The Sickness unto Death*, pseudonymously attributed to one Anti-Climacus. The pseudonyms themselves provide an important hint as to how one should understand the relation of these two texts, especially in consideration of the style and content of the sources. Kierkegaard’s anti-Hegelian sentiment is well-known, and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* presents ample evidence of this bias – including in the portion devoted to subjective and objective truth, where the Hegelian mediation of these in the historical end-point of self-conscious *Geist* is attacked as a fiction.73 Ironically, the terminologically fussy and captiously verbose style of Anti-Climacus’ *Sickness unto Death* is self-consciously and even humorously Hegelian. To further call this speaker Anti-Climacus might suggest that the voice of Climacus is closer to Kierkegaard’s own heart, but Kierkegaard’s extensive use of pseudonyms shows a distinct likeness to Nietzsche’s perspectivism: namely, as Climacus himself has argued, there is no achievable certainty other than subjective certainty, so no one perspective can possibly capture all truth. The juxtaposition of “Climacus” and “Anti-Climacus” similarly suggests that the best understanding of the truth will not be found in either of these figures taken alone, but rather in the synthesis of these perspectives – following Hegel’s model of the development of *Geist* as the synthesis of some thesis and anti-thesis.

In *The Sickness unto Death*, despair is a “misrelation” of the self, whereas a “self” is subjectively understood as a “relation’s relating itself to itself” (as opposed to “a relation

73 Ibid, 197–98.
that relates itself to itself,” which would be the product of objective reflection).\textsuperscript{74} This relation between a self and itself, Anti-Climacus states, is a “synthesis”, and a human being is such a synthesis of distinct modes of the self.\textsuperscript{75} For instance, a human self is in one mode finite and in another infinite, and the synthesis of those modes of being can be understood subjectively as the active relation of these two parts of the self to one another. But human beings, Anti-Climacus continues, are not self-constituted, and as a result they are always engaged in a further relation between the self and “that which established the entire relation.”\textsuperscript{76} For Anti-Climacus this fourth term is God, and the impossibility of ever attaining a final stable relation to God (the “objective uncertainty” in Climacus’ definition of faith) puts an onus upon the self to establish this relationship subjectively, or else fall into the “misrelation in a relation that relates itself to itself and has been established by another,” which is despair.\textsuperscript{77} Inasmuch as this is a constant danger to human beings (being self-conscious, but not the source of their own being), the possibility of despair is ever-present.

But it is precisely this possibility of despair that, as Anti-Climacus says, is “man’s superiority over the animal.”\textsuperscript{78} Anti-Climacus’ point is that it is only through the self being such a relation, and thus having the possibility of falling into a misrelation, that we are able to engage in subjective reflection. As we see in the \textit{Concluding Unscientific Postscript},


\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, 14.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid, 15.
subjective reflection focuses on the relation of the self to the truth – that is, the hypothetical model of reality of the epistemological subject. The “superiority” of mankind in this regard is that the very essence of self-consciousness is to posit and re-posit what reality is, and thus the human being, unlike the animal lacking self-consciousness, has a constant and living relation to reality (which, as the source that constitutes us, is wholly equivalent to Anti-Climacus’ “God”⁷⁹). To embrace such a reality is to willfully posit that which we cannot know – but being conscious beings means that we are always positing a reality, for as we have seen there is no experience apart from the hypothetical guiding principles or categories that condition that experience. The problem of despair is when we fail to embrace that reality which we posit.

Far from being a rare occurrence, Anti-Climacus suggests that this failure is the rule, particularly as so few people are even aware of the model of reality that guides them.⁸⁰ To not just be aware of our model of reality but to embrace it without any possibility of objective certainty is therefore a deeply subjective act – the more so as subjective reflection is precisely the reflection on our relation to reality represented by our hypotheses. Thus, such reflection only overcomes the possible misrelation of despair by willfully choosing that model of reality in spite of its objective uncertainty – truth becomes, as Climacus says, a “paradox” between the subjective and objective, which corresponds to the subjective “passion” that represents the highest inwardness of the subject.⁸¹ Faith, as the expression

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⁷⁹ Defining God in this way is deeply analogous to Malebranche’s hypothetical definition of God as the infinite ideal entity uncovered through thought (cf. Section 3 of the current chapter).

⁸⁰ Kierkegaard, Sickness unto Death, 22–23. This form of despair is described by Anti-Climacus as the despair of “not being conscious of having a self” (ibid, 13).

⁸¹ Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, 199.
of this passion, is the embracing of our reality, but inasmuch as this relation of the self to reality is also what can fall into a misrelation, the function of faith is the category of despair. Faith heals this misrelation through its passionate embrace of reality, but, as Climacus writes, “passion is only momentary”; there is no final resting state in which one has the proper relation to reality as long as one exists.\textsuperscript{82} Just as in Peirce and Nietzsche’s philosophies, the conclusion here is that reality itself can never be known; but now in the synthesis of Kierkegaard’s texts we see how we can “reach” reality by embracing our relation to it through the most inward subjective reflection, even if only momentarily.

Considered from the perspective of the epistemological system, Kierkegaard’s theory shows how any such system is the outgrowth and expression of the epistemological subject’s relation to reality. Furthermore, his distinction of faith and despair indicates that while this grounding is inescapable, whether or not we actively embrace these grounds is a different matter. Subjective reflection is the means by which we can actively assert our relation to reality, and by selecting this as the “true” relation we achieve a certainty in all matters that stem from that relation – namely, existence. The objective truth of existence is thus grounded in the subjective truth of our hypotheses; the truth of description is grounded in the truth of prescription. In order to avoid the constant threat of plunging into objective uncertainty, we must begin by having faith in the conditions of our system.

Wittgenstein’s own writings on the nature of certainty help clarify these conditions of truth within an epistemological system. The concept of an epistemological system is given explicit form in Wittgenstein’s \textit{Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus}, wherein the world

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
is defined from the outset as “a totality of facts, not of things,”\textsuperscript{83} which is to say, in the same idealistic vein as Malebranche and Kant, that we experience phenomena, not noumena. Furthermore, such “facts” are made known to us in the form of “pictures” that represent those facts in terms of their relations to us and which we can express through descriptive propositions of language; as Wittgenstein states, “Such a picture is a model of reality.”\textsuperscript{84} On the other hand, Wittgenstein ends the \textit{Tractatus} by asserting that any attempt to say something non-factual is to say something beyond the limits of epistemology: “we cannot therefore \textit{say} what we cannot \textit{think}.”\textsuperscript{85} Inasmuch as philosophy is interested in questions pertaining to reality, which lies beyond those limits, Wittgenstein notes that the truth of philosophical claims cannot usually be determined: “Most of the statements and questions found in philosophy are not false but nonsensical. We cannot, therefore, answer such questions at all but only show them to be nonsensical.”\textsuperscript{86} Yet while the “truth” of reality modeled by pictures cannot be determined, that reality can still be shown through those pictures. Thus, while our epistemological limits prevent us from describing reality, the relations through which all facts are expressed nonetheless reveal it as the foundation of our epistemological system.

There is a paradox, Wittgenstein admits, in even presenting the theory of the \textit{Tractatus}, for inasmuch as such a theory relies upon and presents core hypotheses, it too is nonsensical: “to understand me you must recognize my sentences – once you have climbed

\textsuperscript{83} Ludwig Wittgenstein, \textit{Wittgenstein’s Tractatus [Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus]}, trans. Daniel Kolak (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1998; originally published in German in 1921), 1 (§ 1.1).

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 3 (§ 2.12).

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 38 (§ 5.61).

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 11 (§ 4.003).
out through them, on them, over them – as senseless. . . . You must climb out through my sentences; then you will see the world correctly."\textsuperscript{87} However, to claim that this system provides the “true” view of the world is no less nonsensical, as it is equivalent to saying that the rules guiding this epistemological system are the correct model of reality, for which there can be no objective justification. Instead, as the later Wittgenstein discusses, every epistemology is an expression of “language games”, the various rules that we are shown through the pictures of the world granted by that particular system. Inasmuch as our rules differ from one another, or change within our own lives, our epistemologically-derived view of the world changes with them, as we have seen in Peirce and Nietzsche.\textsuperscript{88} Thus, objective claims of truth (“facts”, in the \textit{Tractatus}) are in actuality the products of the rules expressed by language games, and hence we see that Wittgenstein’s “language game” is nothing other than a hypothesis of reality – a rule of the system.

To deny truth its objective status is to deny the realist’s basic epistemological claim that reality is what we experience. Wittgenstein’s \textit{Tractatus} already expressed a transcendental idealism in the Kantian tradition, but with his admission of language games he follows the same trajectory of thought as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard in challenging the existence of any privileged set of certain hypotheses. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein took the realist position of his colleague G. E. Moore\textsuperscript{89} quite seriously, and in his final years sought to answer why certain “common-sense” claims of our experience are not reasonable to

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, 49 (§ 6.54).


\textsuperscript{89} Cf. footnote 15 from Section 1 of the current chapter.
doubt. The implication of Moore’s assertions is that, in spite of the apparently arbitrary nature of the language game (and perspectivism’s denial of any set reality), there seem to be a set of core propositions that every system of language games should assert. In formulating an answer to this problem (Wittgenstein’s death during the text’s preparation makes it difficult to assess precisely how he would have organized his response), Wittgenstein echoes Peirce in his endeavor to properly distinguish the language games implied by “knowledge” and “belief”:

One says “I know” when one is ready to give compelling grounds. “I know” relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. Whether someone knows something can come to light, assuming that he is convinced of it.

But if what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds that he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows what he believes.90

Similarly to Peirce, Wittgenstein notes that belief is good enough for the one who believes it, but not necessarily good enough to provide compelling grounds to others. Knowledge, unlike belief, is supposed to necessarily relate to objective truth, i.e. fact: “‘I know’ is supposed to express a relation, not between me and the sense of a proposition (like ‘I believe’) but between me and a fact. So that the fact is taken into my consciousness.”91 But the problem with this use of knowledge is that in practice it is impossible to separate the claim of knowledge from the claim of certainty in one’s belief because, as in the Tractatus, a fact can only be thought of in the form of a sentence.92 The only sorts of certainty that are not necessarily thought are the subjective certainties that are


91 Ibid, 13e–14e (§ 90).

92 Cf. Wittgenstein, Tractatus 7 (§ 3.3: “Only sentences make sense”) and 11 (§ 4: “A sentence that makes sense is a thought”).
shown to us in their function as language games, but this is not knowledge: “There is no subjective sureness that I know something. The certainty is subjective, but not the knowledge.”

The consequence of all this is that Moore has made a mistake in his use of the language game of “knowledge”: “The wrong use made by Moore of the proposition ‘I know . . .’ lies in his regarding it as an utterance as little subject to doubt as ‘I am in pain’. And since from ‘I know it is so’ there follows ‘It is so’, then the latter can’t be doubted either.” Whereas knowledge is meant to indicate the objective certainty of a fact, the claim that one knows is a belief, and thus is subjective. Furthermore, Moore’s assertion that he “knows” these common-sense beliefs raises the problem of whether a claim of objective certainty is possible at all, when every knowledge-claim is conditioned by the language games that justify it. Thus, the problem of certainty is pushed back a level to the language games themselves – the “unmoving foundation” of an epistemological system:

All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments; no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life.

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94 Ibid, 25e (§ 178).
95 “To say of man, in Moore’s sense, that he knows something; that what he says is therefore unconditionally the truth, seems wrong to me.—It is the truth only inasmuch as it is an unmoving foundation of his language-games” (ibid, 52e [§ 403]).
96 Ibid, 16e (§ 105).
Wittgenstein understands such a system as the grounds of all argument – the ultimate source of our justifications of the truth of any claim we make.\textsuperscript{97} Such a system of propositions is “the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.”\textsuperscript{98} It constitutes a “world-picture” or “mythology” that conditions all our experience; the role of such propositions “is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.”\textsuperscript{99} Thus, in the same pragmatic vein as Peirce, habit alone is enough to express this basic world-picture; we need not make this mythology conscious in order to act from it, and in the final analysis this mythology is not a series of ungrounded propositions but “an ungrounded way of acting.”\textsuperscript{100} It is through grounding our knowledge in a system of rules for action, i.e language games, that the judgment of knowledge is possible: “Moore does not know what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our method of doubt and enquiry.”\textsuperscript{101}

What Moore’s claims of common-sense demonstrate is that every epistemology begins by taking as certain a series of interconnected hypotheses of reality that guide our judgments, but for these reasons one cannot challenge these hypotheses from within that system – as we saw illustrated with Occasionalism. This does not mean that hypotheses cannot change, but only that such changes are fundamentally different than correcting a

\textsuperscript{97} “When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions” (ibid, 21e [§ 141]).

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid, 15e (§ 94).

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid, 15e (§ 95).

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid, 17e (§ 110).

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, 22e (§ 151).
mistake in judgment (which happens within a system). Using the example of a king brought up to believe that the world began with his own birth, Wittgenstein notes that “proof” will not be enough to change the king’s mind, because his own world-picture will interpret evidence differently – his existence is not our existence. Perhaps the king could be converted to our view, “but it would be a conversion of a special kind; the king would be brought to look at the world in a different way.”

The king’s world-picture, analogous to a Kuhnian paradigm, can undergo change, and to some extent all inquiry accomplishes this by establishing new beliefs along with their corresponding habits: “The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thought may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself, though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.”

On the other hand, major conversions – paradigm shifts – represent a more fundamental unsettling of our beliefs in which our very grounds for judgment are overturned. Such a radical shift must have a different motivation; we must believe, without any possibility of justification, that the new system will be a better model of reality than the old system, and thus be a better guide for our actions and judgments. As Kuhn writes, the decision to take up a new paradigm “must be based less on past achievement than on future promise. . . . A decision of that kind can only be made by faith.”

The “faith” in question is well-described by Kierkegaard’s infinite passion in the face of objective uncertainty. When the question of what our fundamental hypotheses about

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102 Ibid, 14e (§ 92).

103 Ibid, 15e (§ 97).

reality will be is consciously posed, the choice cannot be made through objective reflection, because it is precisely the grounds for objective reflection that are being challenged. It is only the embrace of a new model of reality that can settle this doubt, and this embrace is not a logical consequence but a wholly subjective choice. This is not the choice in an abstract, indifferent system, but of a world-picture and mythology, of a fundamental way of life, of our very existence. This model of reality will be the ownmost possession of that individual believer. It will unravel as a whole world of experience, including the knowledge of experience in the only form that knowledge can humanly take, namely as interpretation. Interpretation, then, is the epistemological subject’s active creation of meaning through the acknowledgement and embrace of reality. So far is this doctrine from nihilism and solipsism that it is precisely the denial of meaninglessness through meaning’s creation, and the denial of a self-contained existence through the express acknowledgement of that reality which always transcends existence as its very ground.

The foregoing discussion of the limits of epistemological systems, revealed through the philosophical analysis of a series of modern philosophers, demonstrates that the epistemological system described in Chapter 2 is a product of these considerations. The following chapters will further demonstrate that the fundamental aspects of this model are largely the same as those found in Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. But we can already see that the important question such an epistemological system poses is not what we know, but how we know: how, given the inherent limitations within an epistemological system, can we justify that this epistemology provides an adequate exploration of reality? In terms of Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, this question is equally how, from the perspective of Geist, we can assess our grounds in Leben. The present answer, in a
word, is “faith”, but what is needed is a philosophical faith. We must therefore explore the fundamental assumptions of Cassirer’s philosophy, through which the metaphysical principles of this faith will be revealed.
In his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and related works, Cassirer argues that all our experience is necessarily constituted within one or another system of symbols, and describes a number of primary and largely independent systems or “forms” in which our experience can be symbolically constructed. Each of these symbolic forms provides a self-sufficient scheme through which our experience can be conceptualized, and taken together these forms constitute an interconnected network of symbolic conceptualizations that corresponds to our complex experience of self and world. Culture as a whole, being a product of human experience, is therefore itself an expression of this combination of symbolic forms at the level of a human community. The development of culture is in this way seen by Cassirer as an expression of the human spirit (*Geist*) out of its foundations in life (*Leben*), and thus the distinctive character of a culture is seen to reflect the spiritual development of its living history.

Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms developed in large part to provide an explanation for the many shared cultural characteristics observed to exist between societies widely separated in time and space. This was a common concern for 19th and early 20th century scholars of mythology, anthropology, ethnology, and linguistics: how can one account for the astonishing similarity in language, practice, and religious belief among
cultures so greatly separated from one another? Some scholars had sought an explanation through a comparative method that attempted to reduce these materials to a common natural source.\textsuperscript{1} Another prominent line of scholarship developed the historico-geographic method to link these cultural similarities to population movements.\textsuperscript{2}

Cassirer found both of these lines ultimately unsatisfying as an explanatory principal for cultural similarities, particularly as they were applied to the myths, primitive language and religious practices of different peoples. The aforementioned comparative methods, for instance, postulate some empirically-given objects at the root of myth, and thus treat myth itself as a kind of mistake or illusion which our primitive forebears were too mentally undeveloped to properly understand. However, such a theory makes the mistake of treating the underlying sphere of objects symbolized within these myths (be they natural wonders, dreams, or social relations) as if they were given in advance of the very myths that first present them. In the Kantian critical tradition there can be no phenomenal object before our experience of that object, and so to treat the object of mythical experience as pre-given and yet only accessible through the distorting veil of myth is to commit a transcendental error. As Cassirer notes, “every observation that claims to have uncovered the roots of myth by demonstrating the particular object sphere from which

\textsuperscript{1} Two particularly influential theories that illustrate this approach are F. Max Müller’s comparative mythology and Émile Durkheim’s sociological account of knowledge.

\textsuperscript{2} F. Max Müller’s Indo-European migration theory is an important example of this, as is Antti Aarne’s comparative study of folklore and the resulting Aarne-Thompson folktale classification system.
it initially arose and gradually spread remains insufficient and one-sided.” Similarly, the historico-geographic method is quite serviceable as an analytic tool of theoretical thought for understanding surface characteristics such as the morphology of linguistic units, but is ultimately unable to address the deeper problem of the function of myth in human thought and expression.

Both of these approaches treat the content of myth as an object to be studied and deciphered, and in fact demonstrate their utility through the important insights they offer into the psychological and historical relations of diverse cultural groups. However, each thereby risks falling into error by thinking of myth only as a secondary, derived object of lesser “reality” than the supposedly primary object of the underlying phenomenon or historico-geographic transmission of ideas. Instead of these methods, Cassirer looked to approaches such as those of Schelling and Usener, who both argued that the development of myth and religion results from some primary and basic feature of human culture. From this perspective, what underlies the similarity of different cultures’ myths and practices is that they all represent the same human processes, or taken ahistorically, that they all are manifestations of a distinctly human a priori form of thought. Inasmuch as such a form can only manifest itself through symbols, the sort of thinking revealed in and through myth thus becomes for Cassirer a symbolic form of thought.

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In this way myth is elevated from a simple object of study to a distinct epistemological and even phenomenological approach to the world.\textsuperscript{4} In his writings on myth, Cassirer identifies mythical thought as a form of thought that finds expression through totalizing transformations of experience. In contrast to the more typically Kantian form of theoretical thought described by Cassirer, whose ultimate goal is the “reduction to unity” through the systematization of the discrete elements of our experience, the mythical form effects a unity of the manifold by allowing just one element of experience to command our full and immediate attention. This distinction further expresses the insufficiency of the comparative and historico-geographic methods, which as methods of theoretical thinking both focus on the relations between the objects of mythical experience, rather than on the totalizing immediacy of the myth itself. To use the terminology introduced in the third volume of his \textit{Philosophy of Symbolic Forms}, while theoretical thought allows us to understand the \textit{significance} of the elements of our experience in terms of the extrinsic relations of those elements, mythical thought allows us to perceive these elements in terms of their direct and intrinsic relation to the experiencing “subject” – that is, in their immediate \textit{expression}, independent of any further systematization of their content.\textsuperscript{5}

Cassirer provisionally identifies art and language as two other symbolic forms that, along with mythical and theoretical thought, are meant to collectively account for human

\textsuperscript{4} In the Hegelian sense of phenomenology, as described in Section 2 of Chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{5} Cf. Ernst Cassirer, \textit{The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Vol. 3: The Phenomenology of Knowledge}, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957; originally published in German in 1929) and Section 1 of Chapter 6.
thought as a whole.\(^6\) Taking issue with Kant’s transcendental deduction of a single set of categories that are meant to apply in the same *a priori* formulation to every content of experience, Cassirer demonstrates in the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and related texts how the manifestation of concept and object will vary, and thus must always be understood in terms of the specific form of thought by which they have been apprehended as symbol:\(^7\)

Instead of measuring the content, meaning, and truth of spiritual forms by something other than what is reflected in them, we must discover in these very forms the measure and criterion of their truth, their intrinsic significance. . . . [W]e must recognize in each one of them a spontaneous rule of production, an original way and direction of configuring that is more than the mere imprint of something given to us from the beginning in fixed configuration of being. Considered from this point of view, myth, art, language, and knowledge become symbols . . . in the sense that each one of them creates its own world of meaning and has emerged out of them.\(^8\)

In contrast to the Kantian argument that puts the *a priori* categories of theoretical thought at the beginning of human understanding, Cassirer shows in these sources how theoretical thought could only develop after the early, concomitant development of mythical thought, language, and art.\(^9\)

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\(^6\) In his later writings Cassirer adds religion and history as distinct forms; cf. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944) and Section 2 of Chapter 5.

\(^7\) For instance, the concept of “number” is understood differently based on which symbolic form is used to conceive it; cf. Cassirer’s discussion of number from the perspectives of theoretical thought, language, and mythical thought respectively in Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function*, in “Substance and Function” and “Einstein’s Theory of Relativity,” trans. Williams Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey (Chicago: Open Court, 1923; originally published in German in 1910), 27–67; Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Vol. 1: Language*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953; originally published in German in 1923), 226–249; and Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Vol. 2: Mythical Thought*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955; originally published in German in 1925), 140–151.

\(^8\) Cassirer, “Language and Myth,” 136.

This, however, is not the complete story. Though Cassirer frequently describes the symbolic forms in terms of each creating “its own world,” he also notes that the symbolic forms are never found in pure isolation, but rather that they develop alongside and in relation to each other. Furthermore, their nominal distinction from one another must not be regarded as essential, in that each is ultimately a reflection of the same human nature: “We must not think that what we have called by a separate name is a separate entity or a separate function. Man is not a mixture of single and isolated faculties. His activity tends in different directions, but it is not divided into different parts. In all these activities we find the whole of human nature.”10 Thus, while it is useful (particularly from the perspective of theoretical thinking) to distinguish one symbolic form from another, human nature is understood by Cassirer as a whole rather than as a mere totality of different faculties and forms. Instead, what characterizes each symbolic form is how it particularly relates the human faculties to one another: “What, therefore, is characteristic for myth, language, or art is not the fact that in one of them we find a marked process or faculty that is completely missing in the other. It is not the presence or absence of one of these faculties but the relation they bear to each other that makes the real difference.”11

Thus we see that in spite of the orderly division of the first two volumes of The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms into Language and Mythical Thought respectively, Cassirer

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11 Ibid, 190–91.
understands his subject as complex, in the sense that the symbolic forms are not so much distinct as they are representative of different and interrelated ways in which human beings seek to create a “world of meaning.” His third volume, subtitled *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, is less a treatise on theoretical thought than it is an extended discussion of precisely how these faculties of meaning-creation are made manifest through the interrelated development of the symbolic forms.\(^\text{12}\) The three functions introduced in this text – expression (*Ausdruck*), representation (*Darstellung*), signification (*Bedeutung*) – are broadly identified with the basic formative directions of mythical thought, language, and theoretical thought respectively, but, as Cassirer copiously demonstrates, none of these forms are the pure product of just one of these functions. As logical and convenient as it would be to cleanly divide up our formative activities along these lines, the evidence of human activity paints a much more rich and complex picture. The subject of *Geist* as the full expression of human nature requires a complete and comprehensive view of human activity as it is made manifest through every diverse act of symbolic formation.

\(^{12}\) Donald Phillip Verene identifies Cassirer’s 1910 work *Substance and Function* as fulfilling the role of presenting “the symbolic form of science and theoretical knowledge”; cf. Donald Phillip Verene, “Introduction: The Development of Cassirer’s Philosophy,” in Thora Ilin Bayer, *Cassirer’s Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms: A Philosophical Commentary*, 1–37 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 18. Cassirer himself refers back to this work in his introduction to the third volume, but notes that he is now addressing “the question of the fundamental form of knowledge . . . in a broader and more universal sense,” and that “Both in content and in method, the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms has gone beyond this initial formulation of the problem” (*Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 3, xiii).
This complex and large-scale development of the symbolic forms is equally the cultural history of mankind’s coming-to-be. This is the sense of the term “anthropogeny” as it is used in Cassirer’s essay “On the Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms” and that he describes as the “unified process” through which organic life is transfigured and reoriented as spirit.\textsuperscript{13} As the history of this dynamic development, anthropogeny cannot be reduced to one single aspect of this process, but instead must be understood as a complex whole of distinct processes – the symbolic forms themselves – interacting with one another, all ultimately unfolding the relation of Geist and Leben in their characteristic ways and through their characteristic perspectives. The “complete image” of this process results from this complex interweaving of each form’s viewpoint and the “perspectival aspects” that emerge from the transition from one form to another.\textsuperscript{14} If, then, anthropogeny is the development of the human spirit out of its living foundations, the image of anthropogeny is its projection as the living history of culture (Geist) as a whole.

Anthropogeny is thus indispensable for any knowledge of culture, for it is precisely the record of this knowledge – anthropogeny is culture, insofar as culture can be an object of knowledge. Neither in its image or its function, however, is anthropogeny a replacement for a critical philosophy of life or culture, a philosophy capable of analyzing the principles and conditions of Geist and Leben either within or apart from their real human history. For

\textsuperscript{13} Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 67.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
Cassirer, even the most complete anthropogeny is nothing more than an empirical record of the development of culture, and in truth not even this much. For what is first needed to even formulate an anthropogeny is equally implicit in every project of Geist: all projects of the spirit logically demand a Kantian reduction to unity, without which there can be no content of the understanding. Without this unity, effected by whichever phenomenological means of giving form, there could be no representation of Leben, and thus no Geist:

In the critical view we obtain the unity of nature only by injecting it into the phenomena; we do not deduce the unity of logical form from the particular phenomena, but rather represent it and create it through them. And the same is true of the unity of culture and of each of its original forms. It is not enough to demonstrate it empirically through the phenomena; we must explain it through the unity of a specific “structural form” of the spirit.15

Anthropogeny is the living history of the form-giving process in the spirit, but is not itself sufficient to explain this process, any more than a mirror could be said to explain the laws of optical perception. For, while the visual observation of the world and its reflected image may exhibit a great many signs of the nature of optics, this appearance stands yet in need of explanation before any conclusions about the nature of optics may be drawn. And if one were incapable of optical perception, one could hardly fathom what a mirror even was, apart from understanding it in analogy to some other sort of conceptual capacity. So, while anthropogeny does reflect the form-giving properties of Geist, without Geist we would be incapable of forming or even understanding an anthropogeny: the capacity or potential for symbolic formation is phenomenologically prior to its actuality.16

15 Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 2, 11.

16 This is precisely the relation expressed between reality and existence in Section 2 of Chapter 2; anthropogeny can therefore be taken as the empirical knowledge of symbolic formation, and hence as the actualized existence of human reality.
This also helps explain Cassirer’s less favorable treatment of anthropogeny the first time he introduces the term in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, in the volume on mythical thought. In this text, anthropogeny is specifically linked to the method of interpreting myth “championed by Feuerbach and his successors,”\(^\text{17}\) and in contrast to the metaphysical approach to the problem of myth, particularly Schelling’s theogonic interpretation in his lectures on the philosophy of mythology.\(^\text{18}\) Whereas Schelling’s metaphysical focus is on how the history of mythology and religion reveals the absolute nature of God, the anthropogenic approach described here takes “the empirical unity of human nature . . . as an original causal factor of the mythological process, which explains why under the most diverse conditions and starting at the most diverse points in space and time it develops in essentially the same way.”\(^\text{19}\) However, neither approach is sufficient for a critical philosophy, for, as Cassirer explains, both engage in a *petitio principii* by taking the unity which they purport to seek, be it the metaphysician’s Absolute or the human nature sought by *Völkerpsychologie*, as “a pre-existing and self-evident datum.”\(^\text{20}\) But, as

\(^{17}\) Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 2, 13; while it is not explicit which successors Cassirer has in mind (Feuerbach is mentioned nowhere else in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*), he does observe that “since the epoch of German speculative idealism, the problem of myth has been formulated only in this light. Inquiry into the ultimate and absolute foundations of myth has been replaced by inquiry into the natural causes of its genesis: the methodology of metaphysics has been replaced by the methodology of ethnic psychology” (ibid, 10). It is therefore safe to assume that Cassirer means to broadly include the whole tradition of *Völkerpsychologie* as well as its subsequent influence on cultural anthropology in the 19th and early 20th centuries.


\(^{19}\) Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 2, 13.

we saw before in Cassirer’s criticism of the comparative and historico-geographic approaches towards myth, to take such a unity as a fixed property of the world is to confuse an element of *Geist* with an element of *Leben*, and thus commit a fundamental transcendental error:

In a critical approach we cannot conclude the unity of the function from a pre-existing or pre-supposed unity of the metaphysical or psychological substrate; we must start from the function as such. If, despite differences in particular factors, we find in the function a relatively constant inner form, we shall not from this form go back to infer the substantial unity of the human spirit; on the contrary, the constancy of inner form seems to constitute this unity.21

*Geist* itself cannot be taken as any sort of substantial “thing” or object, because to be an object already demands the unity that is only provided by the organizing function of reason. In the critical view, the “constant inner form” at work within reason is not due to some pre-existing ontological unity of some kind but rather a feature of the unifying function of reason itself, through the various sub-functions of symbolic formation: “We can no longer define reason or spirit in a substantial, ontological way – we have to define it as a function. It is not a separate substance or power; it is a way, a method of organizing our human experience. Such an organization is brought about by language, by myth, by religion, by art, by science.”22 A critical philosophy demands that we understand the organizing, unifying power of *Geist* as an immanent aspect of this function that finds expression in every reduction to unity, rather than as the reflection of any foundation in some ontologically pre-existent unity: “Unity . . . appears not as the *foundation* but as another

21 Ibid, 13.

expression of this same determination of form, which it must be possible to apprehend as purely immanent, in its immanent significance, without inquiring into its foundations, whether transcendent or empirical.”

Neither Schellingian metaphysics nor Völkerpsychologie achieve a true critical philosophy of myth, because both take the resultant expression of unity found in their systems as if it were the foundation or source of that apparent unity. But, as we have seen, there is no difference between the appearance and the actuality of unity in matters of Geist: every conceptual unity of nature and culture is only obtained “by injecting it into the phenomena” in and though which that unity is represented and created. In the critical Kantian view, there is no experience without this synthesis of appearance and concept, so no unity of experience can be expressed that stands prior to its very expression. The distinction between metaphysical theogony and empirical anthropogeny is therefore not a distinction of differing grades of reality but only of existential accent. The concept, whether metaphysically or empirically deduced, is neither more nor less “real” than its appearance, because both exist for us only through the products of understanding, through the function of reason.

A critical philosophy must go beyond the empirical-psychological as well as the logical-metaphysical dimensions of human culture. What both of these methodologies have in common is a focus upon the objective side of Geist: both seek some fundamental principle of order to explain the apparent unity of human culture. Geist may indeed “be

23 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 2, 13.

24 Cf. quoted passage above from Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 2, 11.
defined as the progressive objectification of our human experience – as the objectification of our feelings, our emotions, our desires, our impressions, our intuitions, our thoughts and ideas,”

but only if objectification is understood in the dynamic sense of a becoming, rather than in the static sense of some prior absolute or even a historically-situated anthropogenic totality. For a critical philosophy, “Objectivity is . . . not the starting point but the terminating point of human knowledge,”

it is the result rather than the source of Geist, and is at least the apparent aim or telos of Geist in all of its forms: “What man seems to strive at and what he really attains in the different forms of human activity – in myth and religion, in art, in language, in science – is to objectify his feelings and emotions, his desires, his perceptions, his thoughts and ideas.”

What Cassirer demonstrates, out of the core of Kant’s critical philosophy, is that every objectively-oriented theory of knowledge is destined to fail that seeks to be more than a mere description of Geist, or even to be the unique description of Geist. A true explanation of human culture must account for not only the objective side of Geist but the subjective side as well. For Geist is not simply a “what”, a fact to be explained; Geist is equally the explanation of that fact.

Thus a critical philosophy of Geist cannot be limited to the purely objective conception of its subject matter, in which the elements of human culture are treated as so many determinate things. Instead, a critical philosophy must see in each of these things a formation of Geist, a phenomenon that has been created and is capable of re-creation

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26 Ibid, 166.

27 Ibid, 189; as will be shown in Section 1 of Chapter 6, the true telos of Geist is Leben or reality, the objectification of which in the symbol is the very activity of Geist.
according to the changing nature of *Geist* itself. What is ontologically given within such a philosophy is not some underlying noumenal truth or abstraction but rather the very phenomena of our experience: “A critical philosophy . . . no longer understand[s the doctrine of being] as a description of an absolute being – of a thing in itself and its qualities. It restricts the task of ontology to that field of phenomena, of objects that are given us by the different modes of empirical knowledge.”28 It is in this sense that Cassirer identifies himself, like Kant, as an empirical realist but not a subjective idealist, for while the empirical world is rooted in a given reality, it is always for us to creatively interpret that reality in *Geist*:

> The ego, the individual mind, cannot create reality. Man is surrounded by a reality that he did not make, that he has to accept as an ultimate fact. But it is for him to interpret reality, to make it coherent, understandable, intelligible – and this task is performed in different ways in the various human activities, in religion and art, in science and philosophy. In all of them man proves to be not only the passive recipient of an external world; he is active and creative. But what he creates is not a new substantial thing; it is a representation, an objective description of the empirical world.29

The aim of critical philosophy is not simply to know what phenomenally exists, nor on the other hand merely to know the metaphysical forms of that existence. Rather, critical philosophy seeks to understand how the phenomena of existence emerge from these forms, how the potential reality of hypothesis becomes actualized as existence, which is the particular province of phenomenology. The critical philosophy that explores these phenomenological functions and seeks to understand the fundamental forms of thought in

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29 Ibid, 195.
terms of their dynamic function and concrete expression is a philosophy of the whole of
*Geist* – it is a philosophy of symbolic forms: “Philosophy, as the highest and most
comprehensive mode of reflection, strives to understand them all. It cannot comprise them
in an abstract formula; but it strives to penetrate into their concrete meaning.” The
symbolic forms revealed to this philosophy are found and made manifest in the living,
concrete history of anthropogeny.

When regarded as a self-sufficient theory of human nature, anthropogeny is seen to
fall short of a true critical philosophy of *Geist*. However, as the historical record of *Geist*’s
activity, this field comes into its own proper place, and becomes an indispensable
viewpoint for working out the inner development of symbolic formation in light of its outer
development in human life and culture. This is because a true critical philosophy is
phenomenological, and we can only approach the phenomenological relation of form and
phenomena, potential and actual, hypothetical and existential, through the actualized
existence of phenomena. Anthropogeny aims to be nothing less than the entirety of this
actualized phenomena in all of its different perspectives; it is at its maximum the complete
historical existence of man.

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31 Cf. Section 2 of Chapter 2.
3. Philosophical Anthropology and the “Turn to the Idea”

The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms’ reliance upon the evidence of human culture is further expressed in Cassirer’s championing of philosophical anthropology in “On the Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms” as a complementary discipline to his own critical philosophy. Going beyond the merely objective account of *Geist* provided by anthropogeny, a philosophical anthropology recognizes that the “intellectual consciousness” that characterizes human beings only emerges through the mutual determination of self and other, subject and object: “This consciousness is a consciousness of objects insofar as it is self-consciousness – and it is self-consciousness only in and by virtue of the fact that it is a consciousness of objects.”

Rather than seeing the products of culture as merely a catalog of man’s concepts and experiences to be enumerated and sorted, the critical viewpoint of Cassirer understands every item of thought as a product or formation of a consciousness or self that is itself understood through its very objectification of those items. It is in this same sense that philosophical anthropology defines the concept of mankind “through the comprehensive totality of mankind’s achievements.” Since this totality is ever changing, any talk of an objectively *fixed* human nature becomes nonsensical, at least so far as such a nature is treated as a static object of knowledge. Man’s intellectual consciousness or *Geist* is thus seen to be more than the static reflection of *Leben*, in contrast to the anthropological tradition grown out of *Völkerpsychologie* that

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33 Ibid, 43.
treats *Geist* as the evolutionary development of an unchanging human nature. Hence the theoretical object of inquiry for philosophical anthropology is not of a static and unchanging human nature, but instead of mankind understood “not only as subject-object of nature, but as subject-object of culture,”\(^\text{34}\) of a human nature revealed in its dynamic complexity of “subject-object” in which man himself contributes to his own growing definition through his formative activity.

Cassirer’s understanding of philosophical anthropology is in part based on Kant’s usage of the term but is more particularly indebted to the philosophy of Max Scheler, whose philosophical treatment of *Geist* and *Leben* informs Cassirer’s own conception of these terms throughout his essay “On the Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms.” Scheler’s philosophical anthropology is likewise the subject of Cassirer’s essay “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’ in Contemporary Philosophy,” which was prepared around the same time.\(^\text{35}\) By Cassirer’s account,\(^\text{36}\) Scheler understands *Geist* as the ascetic reversal and denial of *Leben*, which are thus together seen as antithetical modes of being. *Geist*, powerless in itself, is able through this denial to reappropriate the natural efficaciousness of *Leben* for its own ends, namely the representation of the world in thought. In this way man is able to realize his

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\(^{34}\) Ibid, 37.


\(^{36}\) With Scheler’s death in 1928 his anticipated major work on philosophical anthropology was left incomplete, so Cassirer’s descriptions are of necessity limited to what had already been published of Scheler’s developing theory.
independence from the necessity that Leben imposes on everything else in the world, and is thus elevated in value over animals.\textsuperscript{37} Like Schopenhauer’s denial of the Will, Scheler sees the unique quality of man in his ability to turn against the necessity imposed from without by moving within – to transform the given into something of his own. For Cassirer as well it is this that significantly distinguishes man from other forms of life, whose representational world fundamentally lacks this transformative quality: “the turn toward the ‘objectivity of things’ is the true line of demarcation between the human world and that of all other organic creatures.”\textsuperscript{38}

Cassirer ventures that the means for finding this distinguishing mark of man comes from his own critical approach: “the fundamental answer to the question of the ‘essential concept’ of mankind . . . can come only from a philosophy of ‘symbolic forms’.”\textsuperscript{39} If we can speak at all about an “essential” feature characteristic of mankind, this feature cannot be any fixed or set characteristic but rather must be understood in terms of mankind’s dynamic activity by which he himself forms a world of fixed characteristics. As Cassirer states, “The simplest and most pregnant definition that a philosophically oriented ‘anthropology’ is capable of giving for mankind would therefore perhaps be that mankind is ‘capable of form’.”\textsuperscript{40} This \textit{capaso formae} is what most clearly differentiates man from other animals, for it is the necessary prerequisite for that differentiation of self and world

\textsuperscript{37} Cassirer, “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’,” 859–864.

\textsuperscript{38} Cassirer, \textit{Philosophy of Symbolic Forms} 4, 62; whether or not Cassirer and Scheler are correct in stating that no other animal manifests this turn towards objectivity, the distinction drawn here between different forms of life is philosophically meaningful.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 37–38.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 46.
that occurs in the transition from Leben to Geist. The emergence of Geist out of Leben ruptures the immediate unity of nature, but in turn establishes the new unity of the human mind: “It is this coming forth, this act of breaking away from the simple basis of nature and life that attests to the essence of the human mind and its being, which, amid all its conflicts, remains identical with itself.” 41

Such a “breaking away” is precisely achieved through symbolic formation. Cassirer observes that a symbolic form is not so much an “existing thing” as it is a “form-creating power, which at the same time has to be really a form-breaking, form-destroying one,” 42 for the creation of form is always equally the destruction of some prior unity of subject-object, all the way down to the undifferentiated unity of Leben. Through this severing of self and world, however, the symbol simultaneously serves to bring that world of Leben close to the subject again through its new objective formation in Geist:

In the medium of language and art, in myth and theoretical knowledge, that turnabout or intellectual revolution takes place which permits mankind to set the world aside in order to draw it closer. By virtue of these “forms” mankind attains proximity to the world and a distance from it which no other creature possesses. 43

The peripeteia in question is not a new one: we have before us the familiar “second Copernican revolution” of Kant’s critical philosophy, presented by Scheler as the distinguishing feature of mankind and extended by Cassirer in its generality as the fundamental function of symbolic formation. The significance of this intellectual

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41 Ibid, 7.

42 Cassirer, “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’,” 878–79.

43 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 38.
revolution is that through it the “other” is no longer seen simply as something presented to a self, but rather that in and through the symbolic forms the very distinction of “subject” and “object” is first formulated: “In each one of its freely projected signs the human spirit apprehends the object and at the same time apprehends itself and its own formative law. And this peculiar interpenetration prepares the way for the deeper determination both of subject and object.”

It is the turnabout itself that demonstrates man’s “nature”, a double determination of subject and object that is constantly changing through the very activity of symbolic formation.

This peculiar double determination is thus the very action of the turnabout achieved through symbolic formation. It is the development of Geist as such, and stands in seeming contrast to Leben, which in its immanence is unable to make any such distinctions within itself. This is made most apparent when the human world characterized by this double determination is contrasted with the undifferentiated immediacy of the animal world. Cassirer notes that Uexküll and Vorkelt have both shown that within the closed “functional circle” of animal life there are no determinate objects and correspondingly there is no “being-for-itself”. Through the double determination of Geist’s activity, however, the animal immediacy of self and world is replaced by an acknowledgment of their separation, which the creative activity of inner formation proceeds to mediate as the unity of subject-object. Corresponding to this double determination is therefore a double movement, “a continuous alternation of the forces of attraction and repulsion,” in which the formative

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44 Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 1*, 92.

activity of *Geist* “always begins by holding off the world, as it were, at a distance and by erecting a barrier between the I and the world,” and which then must be overcome through the mediation of self and world provided by creative, symbolic formation: “Only at the end of this long and difficult way of inner formation does actuality again come into the purview of man.”

It is this double movement of separation and mediation, form-destruction and form-creation, that is at work within symbolic formation and allows each form to establish its own characteristic unity in and through the contradiction of its double determination of subject and object: “The inner contradictoriness, the polarity which necessarily dwells within every such form, does not rend or demolish it; rather it constitutes the condition whereby its unity may again be established out of that contradiction and may thus again present itself to the outside world.” The form is thus not merely the resolution of some prior rupture of self and world, as if it could be understood purely in term of the new unity created through the mediation of what had already been split asunder. Instead, formation is again seen to be an active and dynamic principle through which the polarity of self and world is established and at once resolved within a new unity of subject-object. The process of symbolic formation is both attraction and repulsion, it is the double movement all at once, where creation and destruction merge together as transformation.

This double movement and double determination comprises the very heart of Cassirer’s critical philosophy. It is only in and through this double movement that man is

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46 Cassirer, “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’,” 870.

able to “set the world aside” in order to first make of it an object, and simultaneously of himself, as the phenomenological source of this movement, a subject. The conditions for an object-world, which again is the apparent goal of Geist, “can be surveyed and exhibited only by entering into the ‘in-between’ realm of the ‘symbolic forms,’ by viewing the many-sided image-worlds which man interposes between himself and reality,” which specifically exhibit that double determination in every act of formation.48 That initial separation, however, is what in turn allows man to first truly see this “reality”, and “elevate it from the merely tangible sphere, which demands immediate proximity, to that of the visible.”49 The objectively visible world, inseparably tied in its double determination to the subjective self, is thus no static, pre-existing truth but precisely the result of this transformative double movement. It is this process of becoming revealed in the creative activity of symbolic formation that we have seen to be the proper subject matter of Cassirer’s critical philosophy; now we further see that this process is rooted in the intellectual turnabout by which Geist distinguishes itself from Leben as revealed in the philosophical anthropology of Scheler.

Cassirer also calls attention to the presence of this intellectual turnabout in the late writings on Lebensanschauung by Scheler’s former teacher Simmel, which Cassirer represents as coming most closely to his own perspective on these problems out of all the metaphysical philosophy of his time, and indeed prefigures many of the ideas developed

48 Ibid, 873–74.

49 Ibid, 874.
in the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Cassirer describes how Simmel’s “turn to the idea” involves the liberation of the functions of thought from the immanence of Leben:

[The turn to the idea] consists for him in the fact that what appeared at first to be a pure creation of life, to be integrated into and at the service of its continuing course, is not bound exclusively to this state of affairs, but rather proves to have its own significance and autonomous meaning. The realm of the “idea” is made accessible to us and arises for us by the forms and functions that life has brought about for its own sake, out of its own dynamics to become independent and definite, so that life serves them, and submits itself to their order; this is what gives them their final value and significance. Only after this change has taken place do the great intellectual categories, which previously seemed passive in contrast to life, become productive in the true sense; their own objective forms are now the dominants which take over the matter of life, which now must follow them.

Unlike in Scheler’s philosophical anthropology, which highlights the distinction of Geist and Leben, the emphasis of the turn to the idea in Simmel is on their initial connection, and even more specifically on the way in which the most basic functions of Geist are “functions that life has brought about for its own sake.” What the two approaches share, however, is the characteristic double movement of this peripeteia, by which Leben becomes the material for Geist’s own creative activity. This great turnabout by which Leben is now made subject to the very functions that arose from it is equally then the birth of symbolic

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50 Cf. Georg Simmel, The View of Life: Four Metaphysical Essays with Journal Aphorisms, trans. John Andrews and Donald Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010; originally published in German in 1918); Cassirer calls particular attention to the first two essays, “Life as Transcendence” and “The Turn toward Ideas.” The opening section of the latter essay has particular affinities to Cassirer’s theory, proposing that theoretical knowledge, art, and religion are all basic functions of Geist that produce their own ideal worlds (ibid, 21–25).

51 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 13.
formation: “The ‘turn to the idea’ requires in every case this turn to ‘symbolic form’ as its precondition and necessary access.”

*Geist* liberates man from *Leben*, but for Cassirer the question of whether the turn to the idea in *Geist* is the origin of the symbolic forms, or vice versa – whether the separation of *Geist* and *Leben* comes before or after the formation of that distinction within the symbol – “is basically as pointless as it is unanswerable. For both of these determinations can be grasped only as existing ‘in addition’ to each other; we have here neither a ‘prior’ nor ‘subsequent’ independent element, but always only a correlation of aspects.” In contrast to the distinction between anthropogeny and symbolic formation, in which the capacity for symbolic formation stands phenomenologically prior to its actualization as a cultural history, the distinction here is between two essential, ahistorical aspects of the same underlying function. Anthropogeny is the history of how we as humans separate *Geist* and *Leben* through the symbolic forms, and thus the historical development of these forms, evidenced by the objective products of *Geist* and the concomitant development of the subject, is likewise the development of *Geist* as such. On the other hand, the initial genesis of *Geist* is not a part of this history, but rather a condition for it: the turn to the idea refers to that revolutionary situation in which *Geist* first emerges out of *Leben*. It is the point in

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52 Ibid, 14.

53 Ibid, 66.

54 It should be noted that Cassirer consistently places the emphasis of this process on the development of the group, and not on the development of individuals within the group. Nonetheless it may be illustrative and perhaps illuminating to consider by analogy what the development of *Geist* and even the turn itself looks like within the life of an individual; this suggests a potential dialogue between the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms and developmental psychology.
time – which is the inauguration of our cultural history\textsuperscript{55} – at which what was merely a function of Leben now transcends Leben to achieve its autonomy as Geist, and in so doing makes Leben subordinate to its own ends.

Thus, the question of origins here is not between symbolic formation and the resultant symbols of anthropogeny, but between the separation and transformation of Geist and Leben revealed in the double movement of symbolic formation. For it is in and through symbolic formation that the intellectual revolution incited by the turn to the idea generates a world of Geist, but truly symbolic formation is only possible insofar as the life-processes of the human organism, coopted by Geist, have been freed from the functional circle of the organism to produce a symbol within that world. There is no before and after here because this is one single process, viewed in one or another of its reciprocally conditioned movements: “More and more man learns to set the world aside, in order to draw it to himself, and more and more these two basic antithetical directions of efficient action come to melt, for him, into one homogeneous activity, both sides of which, like inhaling and exhaling, reciprocally condition one another.”\textsuperscript{56} The double movement of symbolic formation thus makes up one inseparable, reflex process of becoming; it is the very breath of life through which the intellectual world emerges and evolves.

\textsuperscript{55} To “inaugurate” is, however, not yet to reveal this anthropogeny in its full stature; for while symbolic formation only demonstrates its actuality through its activity, and thus in its broadest scope we must say that anthropogeny begins with the first acts of formation, these early acts are as yet only the prophetic foreshadowing of any stable concept or experience of a historical totality of culture.

\textsuperscript{56} Cassirer, “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’,” 870.
4. The Dialectic of *Geist* and *Leben*

For Cassirer, the process of symbolic formation correlates with a fundamental and essential dialectic between *Geist* and *Leben* within man, even as it simultaneously expresses the complex totality of distinct and independent symbolic functions each vying to present its own form of objectivity. However, no matter how detailed and complete this expression of our anthropogeny may be, it is never more than a reflection of that more fundamental dialectic by which *Geist* constantly strives to assert its autonomy from *Leben*. The elaboration of this antithesis between *Geist* and *Leben* is for Cassirer the most important contribution made by Scheler’s philosophical anthropology, but this is also where he believes Scheler’s fundamental misstep occurs. Cassirer acknowledges that Scheler “successfully dismisses every attempt at a comfortable ‘monistic’ solution”\(^{57}\) to the dialectical problem of *Geist* and *Leben*’s different functions by demonstrating that these functions are fundamentally incommensurable, that “by no mere quantitative increase, enhancement or intensification of Life can we ever attain the realm of the Spirit.”\(^{58}\) Instead, as we have seen, it is only through the intellectual revolution described by critical philosophy that we can move from *Leben* to *Geist*: “in order to gain entrance into this sphere a turnabout and return, a change of ‘mind’ and of direction are necessary.”\(^{59}\) Scheler,

\(^{57}\) Ibid, 872.

\(^{58}\) Ibid, 869

\(^{59}\) Ibid.
however, moves beyond the merely methodical antithesis of *Geist* and *Leben*’s different functions to instead suggest a metaphysical antithesis between different orders of being.\(^{60}\)

The problem, as Cassirer describes it, is that if this antithesis were indeed of different metaphysical types, then it becomes impossible to account for how *Geist* and *Leben* “can accomplish a perfectly homogeneous piece of work, [how] they co-operate and interpenetrate in constructing the specifically human world, the world of ‘meaning’.”\(^{61}\) Their absolute metaphysical separation would make any unitary and coherent human world of meaning (such as that revealed by a philosophy of symbolic forms) impossible, because such an antithesis, lacking in principle any capacity for mediation of what is absolutely other, would be unresolvable: “When Life is once defined as the ‘wholly other,’ as the contradictory opposite of Spirit, it becomes impossible to see how this contradiction can ever be resolved.”\(^{62}\) Furthermore, such an absolute separation from *Leben* is opposed to the very possibility of *Geist*, which on the contrary is always found to be united with *Leben*, as is revealed in every living person:

> [I]t is this very correlation that is the primarily certain and the primarily given while their separation is something later, a mere construction of thought. The question of how life “achieves” form, how form comes to life, is therefore, of course, unsolvable. This is not because there is an unbridgeable gulf between them, but because the hypothesis of “pure” form (as well as the hypothesis of “pure” life) already contains a contradiction within itself.\(^{63}\)

\(^{60}\) Ibid, 872.

\(^{61}\) Ibid, 864.

\(^{62}\) Ibid, 868.

\(^{63}\) Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 4, 15.
The double movement of formation, as we have seen, takes its departure not from a primary separation of self and world, but from the primary union of the two, and precisely this is Leben. Geist, as the source of this double movement, is thus inconceivable apart from its basis in Leben, but in turn this double movement, as Simmel has shown, can only be conceived of as an original function of Leben itself. It is for this reason that there can be no concept of form apart from life, because the concept of form is a living thing; and analogously, there can be no concept of life apart from form, because the concept of life is a formal thing.

Here especially, the temptation remains to make a distinction between “life” and “the concept of life”, especially in so far as Cassirer readily admits the existence of living things that have no share in Geist. However, such a distinction only begs the question of the entire dialectic, for we can only conceive of “life” insofar as we give it form. What in fact this attempted distinction points to is the distinction of Leben in so far as the turn to the idea has or has not separated and mediated that original unity within the double movement of symbolic formation. Cassirer, taking issue with the metaphysical assumptions of Simmel’s spatial descriptions of Geist and Leben as existing in opposition to one another, emphasizes that it is only the “construction of thought” that can effect such a separation of Geist and Leben, and not any absolute distinction. If, in fact, the true is the whole, Geist must be understood as sharing one being with Leben, or else no mediation between the two would be possible. That such a mediation occurs is precisely what is accomplished within symbolic formation, in which Leben accomplishes the turnabout by which it becomes conscious of itself in Geist. The dialectic of Geist and Leben thus can
only be conceived of as the development of one and the same reality, rather than a conflict between two distinct realities.\textsuperscript{64}

However, to assume such a reality would seem to reenact what Cassirer identifies as Scheler’s principal error. In response to what he takes to be the absolute separation of \textit{Geist} and \textit{Leben}, Scheler’s only recourse is to take a “leap into the dark” towards the supposition of their transcendent metaphysical unity: “we must refer back to the unity of the metaphysical world-ground, the ground which nevertheless unites what to us is and remains manifestly heterogeneous and knits it into a single whole.”\textsuperscript{65} However, falling back on a metaphysical assumption is for Cassirer to evade the problem entirely: “with such an answer the Gordian knot is really not so much untied as cut.”\textsuperscript{66} The real problem is to comprehend the difference of \textit{Geist} and \textit{Leben} despite their unification in man, and the mere assertion of their incomprehensible metaphysical unity does not provide a meaningful answer to this problem. Instead what is required is an understanding of the relationship that actually exists between \textit{Geist} and \textit{Leben}, which necessitates understanding the two in terms of one single immanent reality but does not level all their distinctions in the projection of this metaphysical unity of being. Instead it must be the relationship itself that establishes their wholeness.

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\item \textsuperscript{64} The same criticism may be fruitfully applied to those diagrams presented in Section 1 of Chapter 2, all of which attempt to spatially represent this same kind of distinction; as noted there, one must conceive of reality as underlying everything known and unknown, which thereby renders all such epistemological distinctions as a secondary development of this primary reality.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Cassirer, “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’,” 865.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
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Reality, however, is for Cassirer nothing but a synonym for Leben – it represents that foundation of being, or being-as-such, in all of its possible forms of activity: “Life, reality, being, existence are nothing but different terms referring to one and the same fundamental fact. These terms do not describe a fixed, rigid, substantial thing. They are to be understood as names of a process.”\textsuperscript{67} By leveling terms like reality, being, and existence together Cassirer is probably making a subtle attack against other metaphysics-laden theories such as Heidegger’s, but more than this he is suggesting that the only sort of reality we can talk about without contradiction or transcendental error is the reality of the process itself. There is for Cassirer no deeper level of reality to be reached than the level of its functional activity, which he thus identifies as an Urphänomen, but for this reason it is also “incomprehensible” in terms of anything else and must be simply taken as it is:

The fundamental reality, the Urphänomen, in the sense of Goethe, the ultimate phenomenon may, indeed, be designated by the term “life.” This phenomenon is accessible to everyone; but it is “incomprehensible” in the sense that it admits of no definition, no abstract theoretical explanation. We cannot explain it, if explanation means the reduction of an unknown fact to a better-known fact, for there is no better-known fact. We can neither give a logical definition of life . . . nor can we find out the origin, the first cause of life.\textsuperscript{68}

In this we further see why Cassirer cannot accept Scheler or Simmel’s articulations of a distinction of Geist and Leben as different realms of reality juxtaposed against one another, for all reality – the very presence of some fundamental process of being – is Leben

\textsuperscript{67} Cassirer, “Language and Art II,” 194.

itself, by definition. In a world bereft of any conscious life, there would still be such processes at work – for this is simply what we mean when we talk about there being a world. But it is only within consciousness that such processes can be objectively conceived: “[Man] does not only live in reality but he becomes conscious of reality. And it is not before he has reached this new intellectual state that he can speak of a world of ‘objects,’ of empirical things and of definite and permanent qualities of these things.”⁶⁹ The double determination of object and subject, as we have seen, is the very articulation of Geist, which is equally man’s becoming conscious of Leben. But, this becoming effected by the double movement of separation and unification is itself a process, and thus Cassirer speculatively asks whether Leben may be “something more than mere impulse,” whether it may not include “the Will to attain its own self-portrayal, its own self-objectification, its own ‘visibility’,” and in turn whether, even in its “inhibition” of Leben, Geist may “still be something positively determinate and something positively effective.”⁷⁰ The tenor of such questions is the possibility – incapable of true explanation or proof, for the very reason that we are here discussing the second Goethean Urphänomen of life “becoming truly aware” of its own activity⁷¹ – that the formation of Geist is the process by which Leben comes to know itself. What lends credence to such a possibility is that the alternative, in which Geist is conceived of as an absolutely distinct reality from Leben, not only raises the problem of


⁷⁰ Cassirer, “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’,” 866.

⁷¹ Goethe, Maximen und Reflexionen, § 392, translated by John Michael Krois in Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 127. As Cassirer further describes it, “This influencing and acting is a second essential, constitutive aspect in all our ‘consciousness of reality.’ [There is] no consciousness of reality without this original, nondeducible consciousness of action” (ibid, 139).
their incommensurability but is also now seen as contradicting the very concept of Leben as the whole of reality.

Thus, rather than articulating the distinction between Geist and Leben in terms of different metaphysical orders of being, Cassirer instead suggests that Geist represents a particular kind of process, namely that of Leben’s self-objectification. This is precisely the double movement of the intellectual turnabout, which “is no turning away from Life as such, but rather an inner transformation and about-face experienced by Life itself.”72 What distinguishes Geist from other processes of Leben is conceptualized by Cassirer in terms of “energies of a different order and, as it were, of a different dimension which here stand confronting one another.”73 In contrast to Scheler’s argument, which treats Geist as the absolute ascetic rejection of Leben, Cassirer instead understands Geist as a transformation of one kind of energy into another, drawing on the classical conception of energy as a kind of work (energeia).74 A distinction of energy is thus a distinction of different processes at work, but not of different fundamental realities, and for this reason a real relation between Geist and Leben is possible.

In reference to man specifically, Cassirer identifies “efficient energy” as the process that “aims immediately at man's environment, whether it be in order to apprehend it as it

72 Cassirer, “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’,” 873.
73 Ibid.
74 That is, “not merely as something that has become what it is, but which is continuously shaping itself” (Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 16). The distinction is taken from Humboldt’s description of language; cf. ibid. and also Ernst Cassirer, “Kantian Elements in Humboldt’s Philosophy,” in The Warburg Years (1919–1933): Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology, trans. S. G. Lofts (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013; originally published in German in 1923), 119–129.
actually is and take possession of it, or in order to alter its course in some definite direction.”

This is in contrast to man’s “formative energy”, which instead “remains self-contained: it moves within the dimension of the pure ‘image,’ and not in that of ‘actuality’.”

Neither of these energies constitute man’s “substance”, but rather represent different directions of man’s activity, expressed through his various relations to his world. Like other animals, man is capable of directing himself towards his environment, but if this were all man were capable of he like them would remain trapped within his own “functional circle”. It is because man can also relate to himself and indeed form himself in the double determination of self and world that he is able to recognize and utilize this distinction for his own ends and become a being-for-itself.

It is thus through his formative energy that man is truly distinguished from other animals, but this activity likewise causes man to forfeit “that immediate oneness which, in the lower animals, unites ‘observing’ and ‘effecting’.”

The aim of formative energy is to doubly determine the world as subject-object and thus separate the self as Geist; it is the specific power that Geist “draws from the depths of its own being” and by which Leben is brought to that “relative stand-still” in which Geist accomplishes its apparent liberation from the mere contingency of the life-process.

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75 Cassirer, “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’,” 868.

76 Ibid, 868–69.

77 Cf. especially Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 65–66.

78 Cassirer, “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’,” 869.

79 Ibid.
However, the “being” from which *Geist* draws its own characteristic energy is not a being of a different kind, but rather of life itself, through which the turnabout from the “merely organic” to the “ideal” is achieved:

No longer need the Spirit be viewed as a principle foreign or hostile to all Life, but it may be understood as a turning and about-face of Life itself—-, a transformation which it experiences within itself, insofar as it passes from the circle of merely organic creativity and formation into the circle of “form,” the circle of ideal formative activity.\(^80\)

*Geist* and *Leben*, then, do not represent two metaphysically distinct substances so much as two dialectically interrelated “accents” of thought that “we fix in the process of becoming,” which is the “becoming of form.”\(^81\) This “becoming” is both ideal and organic: it is the living process of formation and the manifest form of life. Thus we see that the turn to the idea is not correctly conceived as a transition from *Leben* to *Geist*, but rather as a revolution within *Leben* by which *Leben* first becomes capable of apprehending itself, of trans-forming itself, of becoming itself as that becoming. *Geist*, apprehended in this light, is not in its “being” distinct from *Leben* but merely represents the way in which *Leben* accomplishes this turnabout and forms itself in the process of becoming. *Leben*, on the other hand, remains the inexhaustible source of all these formations, for these formations of *Geist* are now apprehended as nothing other than the becoming of *Leben* itself.\(^82\)

The constant temptation we then face is to lose sight of this essential unity revealed in the process of becoming, and like Scheler and Simmel to see something absolutely

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\(^80\) Ibid, 875.

\(^81\) Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 4, 15; Cassirer identifies this with the γένος εἰς οὐσίαν of Plato.

\(^82\) Insofar as *Leben* has come to the point of apprehending itself in the turn to the idea.
distinct between the apparent products of formation and the ever-receding life out of which they derive. Instead of falling back on this belief in some fundamental, metaphysical distinction between the one and the other, Cassirer urges us to resolve their dialectical disparity by fundamentally understanding both not in terms of being, but as pure functions of becoming:

Life and form . . . diverge radically as soon as we take one of them to be absolute, as soon as we see in them different metaphysical kinds of being. But this opposition is closed if we instead put ourselves in the midst of the concrete process of formation and its dynamics, if we take the opposition of the two aspects as an opposition not of beings, but of pure functions.  

What unifies Geist and Leben is not their apparent content, which always seems to diverge (just as the actuality of existence diverges from the potentiality of reality), but rather their “correlation and cooperation” in the shared process of becoming. Furthermore, the very concept of “being” is, according to Cassirer’s notes on the metaphysics of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, something secondary to the particular energy through which the conceptualization of being occurs: “there is no ‘being’ of any kind except by virtue of some particular energy . . . and without our taking this relation into account, the concept of ‘being’ would be completely empty for us.” This would seem to contradict Cassirer’s

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83 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 17.

84 Cf. Section 2 of Chapter 2.

85 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 17.

identification of “being” with *Leben* in “Language and Art II,” but in fact illustrates the key difference between “being” understood as a determinate metaphysical concept and the dynamic being of *Leben*, which simply is the process of becoming.

We must therefore seek the unity of *Geist* and *Leben* not in their being, which as an object of knowledge is only ever secondary to their original oneness, but rather in this process, by which *Geist* transforms *Leben* without ever truly supplanting it. And the royal road to this understanding, Cassirer tells us, is through the intellectual revolution provided by the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: “What we need is not the ‘unity’ of the thing, the absolute object, but the unity of geist, of the intellectual [geistigen] energy as such in all its various ‘symbolic forms.’ That is what the philosophy of symbolic forms has tried to give and provide.” This is not to say that the mere products of symbolic formation reveal to us the unity of *Geist* and *Leben*, though as the results of this unifying process of *Geist*’s own becoming they provide us with the only mediate clue to the immediate underlying activity of their formation. It is, however, “only through the sequence of symbolic ‘forms’” that “being acquires an intelligent organization for us,” that *Geist* emerges from *Leben* and “weaves itself into a world of its own, a world of signs, of symbols and of meanings.” Thus it is not in the existing products but in the dialectical activity of symbolic formation,

89 Ibid.
90 Cassirer, “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’,” 869.
by which the potentialities of life are constantly reshaped and made actual, that *Geist* and *Leben* are revealed in their essential oneness.

For this reason we see again that no anthropogeny can ever be a sufficient account of what it is to be human, for an anthropogeny can only provide the actual history of *Geist*, which is to say man’s *existence* – or in Cassirer’s terms, the mere concepts of being, rather than being in its fundamental activity of becoming. And yet it is only through the products of this activity – his “works” – that man’s potential being, his *esse* and *reality* as *Leben*, is revealed. The “work”, the symbolic creation of that formative energy in which the double determination of subject and object is accomplished, is the third of Goethe’s *Urphänomen*; this energy “provides the passage . . . to the sphere of ‘objective’ being” that is “given to us in the medium of the work.”

It is thus in the *Urphänomen* of work, in the symbolic objectification of the world, that man’s fundamental distinction from the rest of Leben is to be found:

> Without symbols man would, like the animal, live in reality. He could preserve his state by giving characteristic responses to different physical stimuli. . . . But in the world of his symbols – in language, art, science – man begins to take a new course, the course of his theoretical or reflective life which gradually and continuously leads him to a new conception of the objective world.

It is not mere life or action but the objective world of symbols produced through his work that reveals the basic form of reality particular to man. The revelation of man’s “essence” in terms of his work is thus the goal of a *philosophy* of symbolic forms, which seeks in the

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91 Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 4, 141.

living history of man’s objectification of the world – in his anthropogeny – the signs of this process of becoming and its ultimate meaning and consequence.

But this essential process of man becoming himself, through which the dialectic of *Geist* and *Leben* is expressed, is an activity and not a finished product: it is *forma formans*, constantly revealed as, but never wholly reducible to, *forma formata*. This protean nature of man causes the essence we seek to ever elude us as long as we try to seize it in the finished products of symbolic formation, and yet there is nowhere else from which to wrest an answer. The whole dialectic of *Geist* and *Leben* is contained in this struggle, and it is inescapable. For *Geist* only comes to know itself in its characteristic form of reality, as that “unity” and “synthesis of life and form,” “by breaking away from its mere immediacy” through the mediating activity of symbolic formation; but this apparent “essence” of *Geist* thereby itself becomes something mediated. On the other hand, to return to the immediacy of *Leben* would entail *Geist*’s elimination: “The negation, the annihilation of the symbolic forms, in order to return to life as something immediate would be therefore simultaneously to kill the mind [Geist] itself – for the mind exists, unlike life itself, only in the totality of these symbolic forms.” In *Geist, Leben* comes to know itself “as One and Many, as immediate and mediated,” through the creative, transformative activity of symbolic formation: “All culture takes place in and proves itself in the creative process, in the activity

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93 Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 4, 18–19.

94 Ibid, 228.

95 Ibid, 231.

96 Ibid, 228.
of the symbolic forms, and through these forms life awakens to self-conscious life, and becomes mind."\textsuperscript{97} The answer to this fundamental question of man must therefore be sought within the dialectic itself, in the “common origin” of becoming out of which the basic function of each symbolic form grows.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid, 231.
CHAPTER 5

THE PROPER SCOPE OF A PHILOSOPHY OF SYMBOLIC FORMS

1. The Dialectical Unity of the Symbol as the Fundamental Problem for a Philosophy of Man

In his late *Essay on Man*, Cassirer asserts that the “essence” of man is not found in any stable, static account of what man *is*, but only in the dynamic, functional account of how man *becomes* what he is, which is the very process of symbolic formation:

The philosophy of symbolic forms starts from the presupposition that, if there is any definition of the nature or “essence” of man, this definition can only be understood as a functional one, not a substantial one. We cannot define man by any inherent principle which constitutes his metaphysical essence – nor can we define him by any inborn faculty or instinct that may be ascertained by empirical observation. Man’s outstanding characteristic, his distinguishing mark, is not his metaphysical or physical nature – but his work. It is this work, it is the system of human activities, which defines and determines the circle of “humanity.” Language, myth, religion, art, science, history are the constituents, the various sectors of this circle. A “philosophy of man” would therefore be a philosophy which would give us insight into the fundamental structure of each of these human activities, and which at the same time would enable us to understand them as an organic whole. . . . It is the basic function of speech, of myth, of art, of religion that we must seek far behind their innumerable shapes and utterances, and that in the last analysis we must attempt to trace back to a common origin.¹

As Cassirer states, the essence of man is not to be found in either the physical or metaphysical “nature” of man, nor in the mere products of symbolic formation, which all go no further than elucidating man in his existence. But if man’s “essence” cannot be found

in the finished products of symbolic formation, which is all that is ever objectively available to him, then it must be found in the process by which these products come to be – man’s becoming himself through his work. Furthermore, no one particular activity, no symbolic form taken in isolation, can reveal such an essence, because what man is can only emerge out of the functional relation revealed through the entire “system of human activities.” Here again, the true is the whole: no one “sector” of the “circle of humanity” can provide a philosophically satisfying answer to the question, “What is man?” because man’s essence, insofar as we can speak of it at all, is to be found through the totality of his work, in the whole circle of his activity.

The answer that a philosophy of man seeks, then, must capture and encapsulate this activity in its totality and at the same time assert its unity. Insofar as the “circle of humanity” is determined by the circle of man’s spiritual (geistig) activities, an adequate philosophy of man is therefore equally a philosophy of symbolic forms, for symbolic formation is nothing other than the transformative activity revealed in the dialectic of man’s own becoming. A philosophy of symbolic forms thus aims to understand the fundamental quiddity or “what-ness” of man, which it looks for in man’s activity, particularly as it emerges through the differing dimensions of his work (i.e. the symbolic forms themselves). But as we have seen, a philosophy of symbolic forms is also therefore a critical philosophy and a phenomenology, for in seeking to understand the nature of man this philosophy must

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2 There indeed would seem to be a potential source of misunderstanding, if not an outright contradiction, in defining man’s essence functionally, inasmuch as the unity of the function is not so much the property of a thing as the description of a particular kind of becoming. Man’s “essence”, like Leben itself, cannot be conceived as a stable set of intrinsic properties but is found only in the peculiar dynamic development of Geist as revealed in the living history of anthropogeny.
account for how the products of culture that define this nature emerge from the basic functions of man’s activity. Furthermore, we can now add that a philosophy remains one-sided and inadequate so long as it fails to fully enter into the dialectic of Geist and Leben revealed in the phenomenological activity of symbolic formation, for not even philosophy itself can be conceived by man outside of this activity. A true critical philosophy must instead be a phenomenology that, like philosophical anthropology, seeks the “essential concept” of man in every dimension of man’s activity, and not in one privileged sphere of that activity.  

For these reasons, Cassirer argues that the proper understanding of symbolic formation, as revealed in the anthropogenic history of the symbolic forms and their complex interrelationship, comes to replace all other concerns as the fundamental question for any critical philosophy:

Once language, myth, art, and knowledge are recognized to be such ideal modes of bestowing meaning, then the basic philosophical problem is no longer how they relate to absolute existence [Sein], which stands, as it were, behind them as an unfathomable substantial core, but how they mutually complement and support each other.

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3 This is the key limitation of the Kantian philosophy, which privileges what Cassirer calls theoretical thinking to such an extent that all products of experience are traced back to the Kantian categories; but, as Cassirer shows throughout his writings on the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Kant’s schema does not accurately account for substantial portions of human Geist, for which other symbolic forms such as mythical thinking and language must be uncovered. However, Cassirer explicitly extends the critical method of Kant to these other regions of Geist in order to produce his Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: “Without varying its nature we may apply it to all the other forms of thinking, judging, knowing, understanding, and even of feeling by which the human mind attempts to conceive the universe as a whole. Such a synopsis of the universe, such a synthetic view, is aimed at in myth, in religion, in language, in art, and in science.” Ernst Cassirer, “Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture,” in Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935–1945, ed. Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979; lecture originally delivered in 1936), 70–71; also cf. Section 1 of Chapter 4.

The problem of the symbol in all dimensions of its activity is thus thought by Cassirer to replace the traditional problems of metaphysics with which philosophy occupies itself again and again. But to fully understand these “ideal modes of bestowing meaning” we must understand how each of the symbolic forms escapes from the purely practical contingency of the life process in order to attain conscious expression, and thereby becomes an autonomous function of Geist. This emancipation from Leben, from undifferentiated “Being”, is not just a condition for understanding the activity of Geist but is the birth of consciousness itself: “the ray of consciousness that here falls upon Being and seeks to illuminate and penetrate it, no longer belongs to the world of things or to a practical context. . . . Consciousness so conceived goes beyond the primordial ground of ‘life,’ but life is thereby neither destroyed nor violated. In the sphere of intellectual consciousness which now arises, life is visible to itself.”

This illumination of “Being” is the creation of a content of consciousness, the acknowledgement of some element of life distinct from the plenum of “absolute existence” in which it presents itself, but the content that emerges finds its ground in life: here again is that double determination of subject and object in which the birth of consciousness is also the birth of self-consciousness.


However, this emergent self-perception points again to the self-acknowledged, fundamental difficulty of Cassirer’s philosophy of man: life’s self-perception can never escape its own conditions of perception, and this circularity ensures that no metaphysical claim can be epistemologically certain.\(^6\) Insofar as we can speak of reality at all it is only as something of which we are conscious, but every act of consciousness is already the symbolic interpretation and mediation of Leben, which remains unknowable in its own terms: “life in itself is never the source of the symbols in which this reality is first comprehended and understood, in which it ‘speaks to us’”\(^7\). No symbolic form can reveal Leben as it is because there are no distinctions of subject and object, self and other, or even inner and outer before consciousness creates those distinctions according to each form’s characteristic viewpoint. We see here the same general limitation on epistemological systems that was drawn in relation to Malebranche’s philosophy: the hypothetical rules of symbolic formation are expressed in Geist, but their expression can never be used to justify these rules as the “truth” of Leben.\(^8\) The general symbolic function of forming Geist out of Leben, coupled with the epistemological limitation of only being able to approach Leben through the symbolic forms of Geist, means that every attempt to trace the source of our conceptions leads only to further conceptions but never to any stable, final ground. No matter how we approach the world we never “see” Leben but only interpret it through Geist.

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\(^6\) At least in regards to traditional metaphysical claims based upon synthetic universals, as will be discussed.

\(^7\) Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 4, 30.

\(^8\) Cf. Section 3 of Chapter 3.
The only answer to this problem is to avoid the question entirely by immersion in the process itself: “Reality can only be delivered from this darkness by the pure energies of geist, by a kind of creative work. . . . The infinity which is denied to the finished configuration lives in the pure process of configuration.”9 The form which such a reality can take is therefore one of “meaning”, an interpretation,10 which is established by Geist in its diverse relations to Leben, the “living world”.11 The very understanding of self and world is but the expression of how each symbolic form transforms what is merely given into an actual content of consciousness: “Every symbolic form works in its own way and by its own means to bring about this turn from mere being-in-itself to being-for-itself.”12 A symbolic form is therefore only properly understood when it is considered as a dynamic function of formation that establishes being-for-itself, rather than as some static in-itself characteristic of “thinglike beings”: “Its meaning and value depend not on what it may be ‘in itself,’ in its metaphysical nature, but on the manner of its use, its spiritual employment. For it is not the rigid substance of language [or any other symbolic form], but its living, dynamic function, which determines this meaning and value.”13 Again we see that the

9 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 31.
10 Cf. Section 4 of Chapter 3.
11 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 31.
12 Ibid, 61.
“meaning” – the defining quality of Geist – is its formative energy, rather than any substantive “being” it might exhibit.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus the contents of consciousness, which collectively make up all our knowledge, in truth present no stable, static thing-in-itself. Instead, each symbolic form presents “an ideal ‘structure,’” or better – since we are here never dealing with describing purely static relationships, but rather with exposing dynamic processes – a characteristic way of ‘structuring’ itself.\textsuperscript{15} Even those apparently “rigid” past structures of symbolic formation serve only to give the newly created content of formation something relatively stable to which it may cling, so as not to immediately dissipate: “This creation would, like a bubble, have to dissolve before every breath of air if it did not, in the midst of its originating and becoming, encounter earlier structures – forms already originated and in existence – to which it may cling and hold fast.”\textsuperscript{16} In this way, as Cassirer illustrates in terms of the symbolic form of language, novel acts of formation may be said to “flow into” the whole history of previous formations, and if suitably meaningful may perpetuate themselves by altering the current:

Every single act of speech flows again back into the great river-bed of language itself, yet without being entirely lost and perishing therein. Instead, the stronger was its own individuality, borrowed from the originality of its creator, the more it maintains itself and the more strongly it transmits itself – in such a way that, by means of the new momentary impulse, the current as a whole may be altered in its direction and intensity, in its dynamics and rhythm.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Section 4 of Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{15} Cassirer, \textit{Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4}, 50.

\textsuperscript{16} Cassirer, “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’,” 879.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
This same metaphor is used by Wittgenstein to describe how the “mythologies” that make up our world-picture, our “river-bed of thought,” may likewise shift in the presence of a suitably strong “movement of the waters.”18 The “river-bed” of each symbolic form is likewise treated as only a relatively stable function that remains ever capable of altering its course, and just as in Wittgenstein’s metaphor there is “no sharp divide” between the general form and the individual act of formation.19

In seeming contrast to their immanence as “pure energies of geist,” Cassirer argues that the functions of the symbolic forms and “the relation between ‘Life’ and ‘Spirit’ therein” can only properly be described in terms of dynamic metaphors such as these that eschew “any figures whatsoever borrowed from the static world, the world of things and thing-relationships.”20 Such static conceptions are foreign to the actual functioning of the symbolic forms, for it is only through the activity of symbolic formation that “things” are first produced in the sense of phenomenal objects. There is no immediate “material” of consciousness upon which these forms work, for all our experience is already the mediated, doubly determined subject-object of symbolic formation: “Immediacy itself, insofar as there is any, can never be immediately grasped or experienced. Our approach to it is something thoroughly mediated, insofar as it is a kind of reduction.”21 As the pure energy


19 Ibid.

20 Cassirer, “‘Spirit’ and ‘Life’,” 879–880.

21 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 50.
of formation, consciousness is always for-itself, a self-consciousness inseparable from its very content, which does not so much disclose the world as construct it through multiple simultaneous methods of development.

For this reason, Cassirer observes that the “organization and division . . . that the philosopher brings to the contents of these functions, to the living web of thought, is something quite foreign to it.”22 There is no true static picture of man, because man is not a static thing. The dynamic development of symbolic formation is that very creation and unfolding of tension between self and other, stemming from Geist’s capacity to oppose itself. Self-consciousness thus demonstrates the unity of subject and object, the self in its own double determination, but also necessarily proceeds from their prior distinction: “Neither can be separated from the other; the unity of the I does not come before that of the object but rather is constituted only through it.”23 In this way the dialectic of Geist and Leben reemerges out of the philosopher’s struggle to understand this complex double determination of self and other, and how through symbolic formation such a relation is rendered visible. But this dynamic relation of Geist and Leben is not a picture so much as a dance, in which the first, despite all of her increasingly intricate and florid motions, stays ever in locked step with her partner: “Always changing, but ever itself, near and far and far and near, geist in all of its productivity always stands opposed to life without ever turning against it, without ever being antagonistic toward it.”24

22 Ibid, 6.
23 Ibid, 64.
Here again we see that this dialectic results from the ever-evolving expression of the opposition of Geist and Leben that emanates out of and in contrast to their primary oneness in the double movement of symbolic formation. The inherent wholeness of Leben stands opposed to the apparently irreducible multiplicity of Geist, whether we consider Geist in its uncountable formations or even in its distinct symbolic forms. Insofar as we approach the conditions of human life critically, we find that all of the dialectical oppositions of metaphysics ultimately resolve into this one fundamental opposition: “it gradually comes to absorb into itself and eliminate all the other pairs of metaphysical terms that have been coined in the history of metaphysics.” But this apparent opposition speaks to the deeper truth of their necessary functional unity through which, as per Simmel’s theory, human life is simultaneously conceived in both its immanent wholeness and manifest multiplicity: “life’s actual movement consists in the oscillation between two extreme phases. It is never at one with itself except by being beyond itself at the same time.” This attempt to reunify Geist in its general, functional opposition to Leben through the turn to the idea “reflects a new expression and a new conception of the problem” and

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25 Ibid, 8. Cassirer continues: “The opposites of ‘Being’ and ‘Becoming,’ of ‘One’ and ‘Many,’ ‘Matter’ and ‘Form,’ ‘Soul’ and ‘Body’ all appear now to have been dissolved into this one completely fundamental antithesis” (ibid.). He further illustrates this reduction of opposites into the unity of an antithetical relation in his notes to the third volume: “On our view, the general and particular, sensory and intellectual, passive and actual, ‘impression’ and ‘expression’ cannot be separated at all; we only possess these two aspects ‘at once’ and together.” Ernst Cassirer, “The Concept of the Symbol: Metaphysics of the Symbolic (c. 1921–1927),” in The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Vol. 4: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms, trans. John Michael Krois (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 224. Further references will be to pages 223–234 of the collected volume, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4.

26 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 9.
“pushes it back further into the concept of life itself,” though, as we have seen, this move does not so much resolve the problem as clarify it. What a philosophy of man must now do, and what the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms attempts, is to find the fundamental principle of unity at work within this dialectic, the principle of man’s becoming, for such a principle would be the closest thing to an “essence” of man.

2. The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms as a Critical Solution

Through whichever terms we use to approach the problem of man’s “essence”, we find ourselves caught in the dialectic of Geist and Leben. But if this dialectic is to reflect a truly critical philosophy, it must first be shown that it does not reduce to yet another untenable metaphysics. The unity expressed in the relation of Geist and Leben cannot simply be the reflection of some question-begging a priori assumption, as for instance we have seen in the competing mythogonic worldviews of Schelling and the Völker-psychologists, but must emerge in some other way out of the dialectical relation of Geist and Leben.

Cassirer describes his own worldview as “Symbolic Idealism”, which “is opposed both to the metaphysics of dogmatic Realism and to the metaphysics of so-called Positivism” because “they see the source of intellectual life and its functions in some kind

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27 Ibid, 8.
28 Cf. Section 3 of Chapter 4.
29 Cf. Section 2 of Chapter 4.
of ‘reproduction’ and ‘mirroring’ of some ‘reality’ given independently of them.”

Inasmuch as the unity of Geist and Leben is found in the relation of one to the other, that unity cannot be the mere reproduction or reflection of just one of the terms of that relation: their unity can neither be reduced to a metaphysical Lebensphilosophie nor to a conceptual positivism, for either approach reflects a conceptual assumption of Geist and thus begs the entire dialectical problem. The problem, as we have seen, is that no metaphysical assertion can be made of the identity of “intellectual life” and its underlying “reality” or “Being” without falling into the transcendental error of asserting that which lies precisely outside of predication. Whether one begins from “the univocal ‘being’ of the ‘world’ or of ‘sensations’,” one is led to “unsolvable contradictions and antinomies in the interpretation of this supposedly unitary being” that “cannot be resolved as long as one clings to the notion of Being as a univocal, certain starting point.”

Kant’s critical philosophy demonstrates how such an assumption makes the key mistake of taking for granted that which is precisely meant to be the result of inquiry – namely, the reduction of the manifold to the unity of Being itself. In his introduction to the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Cassirer distinguishes the metaphysical approach from the critical approach in terms of how they establish this relation of unity in the object, noting that their “solutions to the problem differ in that they presuppose different concepts of the

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30 Ernst Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 223.
31 Cf. Section 1 of Chapter 3.
32 Ernst Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 224.
‘universal’ and hence a different notion of the logical system itself.” In Kantian terms, the metaphysical view is characterized by the use of a *synthetic universal* that connects everything together “by the constant application of one and the same methodical principle”; the problem, as we see for instance in Schelling’s philosophy of mythology, is that this universalizing principle is taken for granted, and thus only discovers the unity in being that it has already assumed to be there. As with Peirce’s criticism of the *a priori* method of coming to belief, starting from a metaphysical assumption is an untenable method for establishing a secure belief precisely because we are apt to make assumptions that are “agreeable to reason,” that give us precisely the picture that we are looking for.

The danger of such a metaphysics is especially keen when this synthetic universal posits some form of absolute being, for in so doing *Geist* loses its vital sense as the disclosure of that being through its dialectical relation to *Leben*. As Cassirer observes, such a metaphysics “must either take seriously the fundamental concept of being, in which case all relations tend to evaporate, . . . or it must, in recognizing these relations, turn them into mere ‘accidents’ of being.” In the first case, the relations “evaporate” because the concept of absolute being “implies ultimate absolute elements, each of which is a static substance

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35 Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 1*, 95.


37 Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 1*, 97.
in itself, and must be conceived for itself.” 38 However, such absolute and independent substances would then have no relation to anything else, and thus would disclose “no necessary or even intelligible transition to the multiplicity of the world, to its particular phenomena.” 39 Such a world, bereft of all relation, would be a world of being, but a being to which we had no access; it would be a dead world of absolute essences, unchanging and furthermore meaningless, because the very construction of meaning is only conducted through the relations of symbolic formation that such a world denies.

The second case retains these relations, but only as “accidents” or secondary effects of being, and thus not as characteristics of being itself. The world here remains a static thing, in that in itself it has no relations to serve as dynamic principles of change, but the relations between its essential elements are retained in a secondary, derived sense. However, it is then only through these secondary accidents that primary being is revealed, and thus being is essentially removed from the knowledge of that being and “becomes lost in the void of mere abstraction.” 40 Just as in the former case, then, the being that metaphysics asserts in the synthetic universal is lost to us as a result of that very assertion. The more emphatically and dogmatically the metaphysician articulates this concept of being, the more being itself becomes, to use Climacus’ metaphor, “a chimera of abstraction,” an impossible mediation of subject and object already assumed to be

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid, 98.
absolutely separate.\textsuperscript{41} Climacus’ criticism is specifically leveled against this mediation as it appears in Hegel’s system and Fichte’s I = I, both of which serve as examples of the more general problem: to objectively assert the unity of an absolute subject and absolute object only serves to turn this unity into a mere abstraction of pure objective reflection. Such reflection focuses on the “what” of the relation, which is all that remains when this relation is understood as a secondary characteristic of being, rather than on the subjective “how” of the relation when it is taken as a primary mode of “truth”.\textsuperscript{42}

In the course of philosophical and theological history we see that there is no end to the “contradictions and antinomies” that result from such a method of postulating the unity of being through a synthetic universal, further justifying Peirce’s observation that this history resembles more a matter of fashion or taste than the progress towards truth.\textsuperscript{43} The pure empirical approach to being of course fares no better. Even where empiricism does not hide its own tacit metaphysical assumptions (such as the positivistic essentialization of sense-data), it too engages in a fruitless task so long as it proceeds from the absolute divorce of subject and object, self and world. The logical result of such a procedure is always skepticism, as exemplified by Hume. The Kantian critical solution is therefore just as important here as it is in the criticism of those absolutizing metaphysical theories based on


\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, 199; cf. also Section 4 of Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{43} Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” 119.
the synthetic universal, for in both cases it demonstrates that this opposition of subject and object must be regarded as unified within their relation.

As we have seen, the empirical consequences and epistemological limitations of the critical worldview are traced out particularly well in Peirce’s pragmatic philosophy. Like Cassirer, Peirce argues that thought can only be constructed symbolically, and further develops an epistemological model wherein humans are situated within a field of symbolically constructed beliefs that can only be changed through a process of doubt and inquiry. However, this symbolic construction of reality also implies its epistemic limitation, for reality itself is only available as a hypothesis to be actualized through these symbols and thus can never be grasped as a pure ground of knowledge. Empirical inquiry thus becomes an infinite task, for no amount of such inquiry can ever transcend the mediated world of knowledge to reach the immediacy of reality. Peirce’s pragmatic approach to reality never comes to rest in the knowledge of some ultimate and unchanging truth. The model of infinite inquiry exemplifies the impossibility of Geist ever achieving any static, final form.

Even here, however, the specter of the synthetic universal remains, for the fundamental hypothesis of Peirce’s critical method of science is that there is some final reality towards which all inquiry ultimately aims. In Peirce’s rejection of the a priori method of forming metaphysical hypotheses, he attempts to distinguish this special hypothesis of reality-as-such from the critically unsound synthetic universals that underlie

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44 Cf. Section 2 of Chapter 3.

45 Ibid.
the back-and-forth of philosophical history. However, insofar as Peirce treats reality as a static telos towards which the dynamic process of infinite inquiry aims, and not a dynamic process in its own right – or more to the point, insofar as Peirce treats the process of inquiry as distinct from reality itself – he has introduced a synthetic universal of his own. Such an assumption, like every other metaphysical assumption, can never be justified by inquiry, for inquiry itself can only reflect the hypotheses of reality that have already been taken for granted. This assumption manifests in Peirce’s method of science as a sort of confirmation bias: reality appears to be stable and static, because it has already been assumed to be so. In telling contrast to Nietzsche’s perspectivism, Peirce’s method of inquiry makes the critical misstep of assuming that there is one privileged viewpoint by which reality is made manifest, rather than acknowledging that every viewpoint, and every synthetic universal thereby expressed, is equally a reflection (and interpretation\(^46\)) of the dynamic life process.\(^47\)

We see here the same problem as in Malebranche’s Occasionalism: reality always and only appears to us through the hypotheses of reality we have already assumed.\(^48\) Every synthetic universal provides its own principle of unity for the interpreting of reality, and the system of these principles or rules that are active for the interpreting subject makes up

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\(^{46}\) Cf. Section 4 of Chapter 3.

\(^{47}\) On the other hand, Cassirer’s primary criticism of Nietzsche expressed in his writings on metaphysics is that Nietzsche’s explanatory use of the Will to Power as the underlying motive of all life processes, including the formation of Geist, is itself a reductive metaphysical assumption that, like Peirce’s, finds nothing but confirming evidence for itself; cf. below.

\(^{48}\) Cf. Section 3 of Chapter 3; for the remainder of the paragraph and the next one, cf. especially Section 4 of Chapter 3.
the Wittgensteinian world-picture through which interpretation – that is, the subject’s existence – may be formulated. By privileging his fundamental hypothesis of reality, Peirce seeks to escape the problem of subjectivity by relegating it to the mere epistemological problem of forming beliefs, i.e. of interpreting reality. But through this hypothesis Peirce is implicitly advocating that radical separation of interpreting self and interpreted world that spelled the flaw of Simmel and Scheler’s conceptions of *Geist* and *Leben*.\(^{49}\) True, Peirce dismisses “truth” as indicating only the subject’s conviction of belief, banishing metaphysical knowledge-claims to mere epistemic statements of an individual subject, and thus demonstrating the dynamic character of *Geist*. However, in retaining the image of reality as the “one true conclusion” of inquiry,\(^{50}\) the absolute separation of *Geist* and *Leben* within his conception is made all the more manifest. This “one true conclusion” is equivalent to saying the “one true world-picture” or “one true perspective seeing,” and Peirce’s very use of the word “true” indicates the problem: as he himself has demonstrated, truth is merely the subject’s conviction of certainty.

Not that this conviction is trivial; as Wittgenstein indicates, one never “knows” their world-picture, but rather believes it in such a way that to doubt it would require a radical conversion precisely akin to a Kuhnian paradigm shift. To speak again in Kierkegaardian terms, one does not know reality objectively, because this approach to reality is limited to the approximation process of Peirce’s infinite inquiry. Instead, reality is grasped by faith in its “subjective truth”, which is found not in the object alone but in

\(^{49}\) Cf. Section 4 of Chapter 4.

\(^{50}\) Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” 120.
the active, dynamic relation of the subject to the object. Subjective truth is thus grounded in the nature of the subject itself, that active relating of the relation of the self to itself, which as self is also Geist. Anti-Climacus’ definition of the self in terms of this active, dynamic relation of self-becoming is thus very similar if not identical to the relation of Geist and Leben as described by Cassirer.

With this, a key distinction is revealed between Climacus’ infamous “leap of faith” and the “leap into the dark” of assuming some synthetic universal. In the latter case, the mere assumption of a metaphysical truth attempts to “cut the Gordian knot” of the dynamic relation of self and world by establishing a static truth. Climacus’ leap, however, does not so much assume a synthetic universal as express the actuality of Geist’s relation to self and world, which always proceeds from within a system of assumptions – a river-bed of more or less stable certainties – that is itself an expression of that dynamic relation. The heart of the distinction is in the temporal character of Climacus’ leap, which only exists in the “moment of passion” and through which the dialectical relation is not to be finally overcome, as the synthetic universal attempts, but instead embraced in the fullness of its paradox. Again, Climacus calls faith the “category of despair” because faith logically requires the possibility of that misrelation of the self by which the different modes of self


52 Cf. Section 4 of Chapter 4 for Cassirer’s criticism of Scheler’s “leap into the dark” of the metaphysical unity of Geist and Leben.

53 Cf. Section 1 of the current chapter.
– finite and infinite, being and becoming, free and determined, and even self and God\textsuperscript{54} – are revealed in their separation. Despair and faith, however, together represent that same double movement of separation and reunification by which Geist transforms Leben, and moreover the relation expressed by this double movement is nothing other than the Kierkegaardian self.

From these considerations we are led to understand the epistemological system of the subject, that world-picture of synthetic universals by which the interpretation of reality as existence is made possible, as nothing less than the expression of Geist’s relation to the reality of Leben. Geist mediates self and world in the double movement of formation, but also dialectically finds its source in a reality that, like Anti-Climacus’ God, simultaneously grounds it and transcends it. The relation of Geist and Leben is therefore equivalent to the relation between existence and reality presented in Chapter 2 as well as the relation of self and God in The Sickness unto Death, all of which must be understood as dynamic activities rather than static states of being. And while the relation of existence to reality must always be carried out within a system of hypotheses about that reality (what Wittgenstein calls mythologies or language games), in the subjective mode of reflection these hypotheses are no longer treated as objective truths but as the mutable conditions by which the activity of formation is made possible. This mutability, however, means that any search for a “simple unity of Being” independent of these conditions is doomed to failure: as Cassirer notes, “gradually there turns out to be no way for us to grasp this supposed ‘simple unity.’”

\textsuperscript{54} Kierkegaard, The Sickness unto Death, 13.
constantly falls apart into a variety of conflicting ‘viewpoints’.”\textsuperscript{55} Drawing the same consequences from Kant as Nietzsche, Cassirer decisively challenges the objective certainty of any metaphysical belief expressed as a synthetic universal, because there is no belief outside of the dialectical relation of \textit{Geist} and \textit{Leben}, and thus there is no universal and unchanging relation, no univocal viewpoint. As opposed to a Kierkegaardian faith in the relation itself, the metaphysical “faith” in some stable and univocal truth of Being is, as Nietzsche suggests, our “most enduring lie.”\textsuperscript{56}

Cassirer’s own Symbolic Idealism begins with this same critical awareness that “no separation can be made between some positively given being and the intelligent [geistig] functions, which are presumed to apply subsequently to this material.”\textsuperscript{57} Instead, our only access to Being (that is, \textit{Leben}) comes through the dynamic activity of \textit{Geist}, thereby avoiding the basic transcendental error of assuming that Being is some unitary and static starting point from which all other knowledge may then be derived:

We have access to no “Being” of any kind – be it metaphysical or psychological in nature – prior to and independently of intelligent action, but only in and through this action. . . . There is no form of “Being” for us outside of these different kinds of action (in language, myth, religion, art, science) because there is no other form of determinacy.\textsuperscript{58}

Here again we see the basic contention of critical philosophy: there is no “world” for us prior to our ability to form that world in thought, in the functions of \textit{Geist}. And vice versa.

\textsuperscript{55} Cassirer, \textit{Philosophy of Symbolic Forms} 4, 225.

\textsuperscript{56} Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974; originally published in German in 1882 with final revisions and additions in 1887), 283 (§ 344: “How we, too, are still pious.”).

\textsuperscript{57} Ernst Cassirer, \textit{Philosophy of Symbolic Forms} 4, 223.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
each different “intelligent activity” gives rise to its own world-picture, the unity of which is not found in any certain metaphysical hypothesis, but “is rooted in a common origin, in a principle of action, as the philosophy of symbolic forms shows.” The key to Symbolic Idealism, then, is to find this principle of action that stands at the root of the relation of Geist and Leben.

As Cassirer notes, Symbolic Idealism “begins not with the simple unity of the thing (substance), but with the unity of function.” In contrast to the substantive unity of Being asserted by the synthetic universal, the critical view aims to discover the functional unity of an analytic universal by “gathering all the possible forms of connection into a systematic concept and thus subordinating them to definite fundamental laws.” The critical view takes no unity for granted, but instead focuses on the totality of distinct and even divergent systems – which together form the unity of a “complex system” of different interrelated functions. The critical emphasis is not on the unity of Being as such but instead on the unity of Geist, our consciousness of Being. Here we discover a functional rather than a substantial sense of unity in which all the seemingly disparate activities of consciousness – the symbolic forms themselves – are seen to stand “in a necessary correlation” with one another: “The unity of geist is to be found only in the plurality of symbolic forms, not as a

59 Ibid, 225.
60 Ibid.
61 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms I, 95.
62 Ibid.
substantial unity but as a functional plurality. Geist becomes one through its conscious awareness of its identity (as action in general) in the plurality of various activities.”

The total picture of Geist therefore changes insofar as different functional rules in human culture and thought may develop and be observed. This accounts for the significantly empirical quality of Cassirer’s actual work on the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, for it is only through the analytic universal uncovered in the comprehensive study of human existence (Geist, in all of its symbolic expressions) that the underlying functions of that existence may be usefully discerned. Cassirer expresses the heart of this method in his notes for a proposed fourth volume of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms:

The philosophy of symbolic forms seeks out the entirety of the perspectival views in which reality is disclosed to us. It does not begin with a prejudice about the character of their reality, but seeks to understand every view according to its own norms. Each form or “view” carries in itself the measure of its reality. We must first find this measure and learn to understand it – the measure of language, myth, science. For us true reality is the subject which is capable of all these “views.”

Here Cassirer mentions three forms; in other writing from this period he typically includes art as a fourth; his discussion in the Essay on Man seems to separate myth and religion, and to add history to the list as well. But the specific number or even kinds of forms is not essential, because this is not a metaphysical theory: what matters instead is that the underlying functions of consciousness are accurately revealed (de-ciphered). Furthermore, as anthropogeny shows, the specific symbolic forms that we may identify are not so much

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63 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 225.

necessary conditions as particular functional developments of a historically-situated Geist. The desire for a philosophical system of the different symbolic forms, “a standpoint which would make it possible to encompass the whole of them in one view, which would seek to penetrate nothing other than the purely immanent relation of all these forms to one another,”⁶⁵ can therefore only avoid the trap of the synthetic universal if it places the unity of the system in the interrelations of functions revealed through the critical analysis of the whole of anthropogeny.

This further points to the key distinction between Cassirer’s approach to the plurality of forms and the perspectivism of Nietzsche. While both thinkers share the criticism that there is no perspectival view free of its own idiosyncratic hypotheses of reality, Nietzsche nonetheless reductively asserts the univocal explanation of the Will to Power as the underlying motive for every formation of Geist. But this is itself the assumption of a synthetic universal that cannot be disputed within its own world-picture, but only from without: “It is not the inferences that are drawn here, but the concept of geist that is presupposed against which an objection can be made. . . . [T]he philosophy of symbolic forms finds that it meets with geist everywhere as not the ‘Will to Power,’ but as the ‘Will to Formation’.”⁶⁶ In advancing Geist as the expression of an underlying “Will to Formation” in Leben, Cassirer is not making the same mistake as Nietzsche of inputting a synthetic universal at the heart of his philosophy, for his Will to Formation merely expresses that every viewpoint is made up of symbols, and that every symbol must be

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⁶⁵ Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 1, 82.

critically understood in terms of the process of formation by which Geist emerges from Leben. This process, in its generality, is nothing other than the analytic universal – it is the “measure of reality” that each perspective expresses in its particular formative function, regardless of what particular assumptions have been made, and which is finally revealed in its systematic fullness through the totality of all perspectives: “The achievement of each [perspective] must be measured by itself, and not by the standards and aims of any other – and only at the end of this examination can we ask whether and how all these forms of conceiving the world and the I are compatible with one another – whether . . . they do not complement one another to form a single totality and a unified system.”

This cuts off any criticism that the symbolic forms identified by Cassirer are (or even represent) specific metaphysical assumptions of his philosophy, for it is neither the world-picture nor the concrete expression of these forms but rather the complex totality of their functional interrelationships that makes up the true subject matter of a philosophy of symbolic forms. As Cassirer states, the “task” of this philosophy “consists in comprehending the basic symbolic character of knowledge itself. . . . [W]e must strive to comprehend every symbol in its place and recognize how it is limited and conditioned by every other symbol.” What the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms studies is no individual symbol, nor even the entire catalog of symbols conceived from within one viewpoint; it aims rather at the dynamic formation of the subject-object of Geist, in which the subjective process and the objective result find their shared source. Nor does philosophy develop a

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67 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 1, 91.
68 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 226–27.
symbolic form of its own: philosophy is the “self-knowledge of reason,” it is “both criticism and the fulfillment of the symbolic forms,” and thus philosophy has only “truly grasped itself” when it no longer strives “to replace the older forms with another, higher form.” In the Kantian sense of criticism, Cassirer understands the goal of philosophy not as the creation of novel viewpoints, but as the progressive comprehension of those viewpoints already expressed and the “active intellectual construction of reality” achieved within each – though we should recognize that this attempt to systematically comprehend all these viewpoints is itself the activity of theoretical thinking. But so far is the aim of a critical philosophy from constructing new symbolic forms or championing one form over another that in fact it would sooner be rid of form altogether, for its paradoxical goal is “to overcome the symbolistic character of the ‘sign,’ even to ‘eliminate’ the sign,” in order to penetrate beyond all these mediating functions to the immediacy of Leben itself.

The goal of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms is then to uncover and elucidate the “rules” of symbolic formation, the functional unities by which each form or viewpoint characteristically transforms Leben as Geist, and the totality of which constitutes the analytic universal of Geist itself. This complex functional unity achieved within consciousness sets no criteria in advance as to what will and will not be unified, nor the kind or number of forms which this unity will take. Rather, it is in the very act of formation,

69 Ibid, 226.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 In the sense of rules as described in Section 1 of Chapter 3.
by which the relative limits of each “quality of consciousness” are exhibited, that the unities
of those qualities are also established, and for this reason every formation of consciousness
is equally a functional rule of formation:

Every “simple” quality of consciousness has a definite content only in so
far as it is apprehended in complete unity with certain qualities but
separately from others. The function of this unity and this separation is not
removable from the content of consciousness but constitutes one of its
essential conditions. Accordingly there is no “something” in consciousness
that does not eo ipso and without further mediation give rise to “another”
and to a series of others. For what defines each particular content of
consciousness is that in it the whole of consciousness is in some form
posited and represented. Only in and through this representation does what
we call the “presence” of the content become possible.⁷³

Unlike the self-negating unity achieved through the synthetic universal, which in its most
forceful assertion of unity only reveals the impossibility of entering into a functional
relation with a metaphysical absolute, the unity of the analytic universal is precisely this
mutually-determining relation of form and content: “here there is not from the very start
an abstract ‘one,’ confronted by an equally abstract and detached ‘other’; here the one is
‘in’ the many and the many is ‘in’ the one: in the sense that each determines and represents
the other.”⁷⁴ The overall unity of consciousness, the “master rule” of the analytic universal,
arises in turn as the complex totality of all these forms.

The critical philosophy of this complex system is for Cassirer the Philosophy of
Symbolic Forms itself. Geist emerges as the totality of symbolic forms, wherein each act
of formation defines and displays its own inner rule, and in turn posits and represents the

⁷³ Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 1, 98.
⁷⁴ Ibid, 105.
whole of consciousness in the characteristic quality of this particular rule of formation. Furthermore, the “content of consciousness” that is formed – Cassirer’s “symbol” – does not precede the act of formation but is its concomitant representation, and is only present to consciousness insofar as it acquires a particular meaning through the functional rule of that act: “It is not the case . . . that the symbolic signs which we encounter in language, myth, and art first ‘are’ and then, beyond this ‘being,’ achieve a certain meaning; their being arises from their signification.” 75 Not even the contents of sensation can be made conscious independently of symbolic formation, for again it is only through the act of formation that anything becomes re-presented as a content of consciousness. The entire question of whether form or sensory content comes first loses its sense once the focus is placed on the act of formation, because here form and content only arise in the unity of the function by which Geist transforms and represents Leben: “We no longer ask whether the ‘sensory’ precedes or follows the ‘spiritual,’ for we are dealing with the revelation and manifestation of basic spiritual functions in the sensory material itself.” 76 Thus we see that the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms is not just another metaphysical theory but a true critical philosophy, for the specific relations that make up the dialectic of Geist and Leben are not merely the reflection of the philosopher’s own assumptions but emerge through the unity of the act of formation itself.

75 Ibid, 106.

76 Ibid, 110.
The revelation of this unity in the totality of becoming achieved through symbolic formation is therefore the closest that Geist can come to achieving its “highest” truth, the truth of the whole:

[T]he highest objective truth that is accessible to the spirit is ultimately the form of its own activity. In the totality of its own achievements, in the knowledge of the specific rule by which each of them is determined and in the consciousness of the context which reunites all these special rules into one problem and one solution: in all this, the human spirit now perceives itself and reality.\(^\text{77}\)

Thus the view of reality, which is to say Leben, is reached simultaneously with Geist’s view of its true dynamic self, and furthermore only through this self-perception. The act of formation unifies Geist and Leben in this sense, that in the resulting symbol the function of Leben is made particular and concrete as a rule of Geist. The totality of these rules constitutes a complex and dynamic symbolic system – a system of systems – in which every hypothesis of reality finds its relative place within the analytic universal of the system as such.

The individual symbolic form, then, is no abstract truth of a synthetic universal, but a particular function by which this “synthesis” of Geist and Leben is achieved; it is the rule-bound function of Leben revealed within the objective products of Geist:

The true concept of reality cannot be squeezed into the form of mere abstract being; it opens out into the diversity and richness of the forms of spiritual life [geistigen Lebens] – but of a spiritual life which bears the stamp of inner necessity and hence of objectivity. In this sense each new “symbolic form” . . . constitutes, as Goethe said, a revelation sent outward from within, a “synthesis of world and spirit [Geist],” which truly assures us that the two are originally one.\(^\text{78}\)

\(^{77}\) Ibid, 111.

\(^{78}\) Ibid.
We therefore see that the unity of Geist and Leben, the “spiritual life” that emerges from “the totality of its own achievements,” is the revelation of man’s reality, which is equally the revelation of man himself. Again it is shown that reality is not something that can be approached as a metaphysical abstraction of being, but instead only reveals itself in the very acts of formation by which Geist and Leben are revealed to be one – which we now see is one and the same revelation. And insofar as the objective forms of this revelation represent the distinct ways in which the products of Geist are produced in accordance with this “inner necessity” of Leben, the revelation of reality – the truth of the whole such as it is capable of being known – is to be found in the symbolic forms themselves.

3. The Dialectical Paradox of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

Nonetheless, not even a complete knowledge of the rules governing each symbolic form can provide any objective certainty of Leben, or of the whole, or of reality, precisely because knowledge is geistig, it is particular, it is existent. The certainty of the whole is not available to objective reflection because what defines the object is that it is constantly outstripped by the plenum in which it is contained. The very act of formation objectively appears to us only through the particular products of that formation, and never as the pure immanent unity of the life process: “The more richly and energetically the human spirit engages in its formative activity, the farther this very activity seems to remove it from the
The fundamental unity of *Geist* and *Leben* is belied by their ever-present separation in existence, even as existence points doubly backwards and forwards to this unity as its foundation and final goal, its alpha and omega. From the first moment in which life appears to itself as spirit this dialectic emerges and remains, necessary and unresolvable.

For this very reason Cassirer closes his introduction to *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* by clarifying that the goal of philosophy cannot be to know the totality of *Geist’s* existing manifestations nor to know the reality of their source in *Leben*. Instead the proper focus of philosophy must be on unraveling the process of becoming itself, and hence on the symbolic forms that together constitute the functional unity of *Geist* and *Leben*:

> The aim of philosophy is not to go behind all these creations, but rather to understand and elucidate their basic formative principle. It is solely through awareness of this principle that the content of life acquires its true form. Then life is removed from the sphere of mere given natural existence: it ceases to be a part of this natural existence or a mere biological process, but is transformed and fulfilled as a form of the “spirit.” . . . If the philosophy of culture succeeds in apprehending and elucidating such basic principles, it will have fulfilled, in a new sense, its task of demonstrating the unity of the spirit as opposed to the multiplicity of its manifestations.\(^{80}\)

At the outset, then, the goal of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is to account for the unity of human life insofar as that life is “fulfilled” through its formation as spirit and becomes a “spiritual life”, its “true form” of wholeness. The keystone of this philosophical edifice would be that “basic formative principle” through which this wholeness is achieved, but while the knowledge of this principle is the aim of a philosophy of man, the activity of

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\(^{79}\) Ibid, 113.

\(^{80}\) Ibid, 113–14.
this principle constitutes the very ground of man’s becoming. This principle, then, is nothing else than the functional hypothesis of human reality, which finds its always-inadequate expression in the dialectical relationship by which Geist separates itself from Leben only to reveal itself as Leben.

The quest for this fundamental hypothesis thus leads to the question of man’s own coming-to-be, but for a sound critical philosophy the answer to this question must not come from the synthetic universals of traditional metaphysics. The answer Cassirer seeks is therefore restricted to “the limits of immanence,” to “the totality of possible ways of giving form or meaning,” for “the ‘Archimedean point’ of certitude that we are seeking can never be given to us from outside of [this totality], but must always be sought within it.” Yet we have seen that even anthropogeny, the full history of man’s becoming, does not suffice for a critical philosophy either. The immanence in question is not the static picture of Geist’s formations but the dynamic movement of Geist itself, Geist’s self-becoming. This question of becoming is tied to the basic functions of Geist, the symbolic forms themselves, whose living history constitutes our anthropogeny. Thus philosophy turns to anthropogeny to discover the basic principle of becoming, but not the immediate source of this principle: it is instead only through the diverse processes of formation found in the whole history of man that the dialectical principle of man is made manifest.

In this way, Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms is always limited to a retrospective view of Geist as it is revealed in its finished forms within the various fields of anthropogeny: “Starting with such forms it must go back and ask about the formative

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81 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 49–50.
powers, about the type of spiritual functions and energies which have produced and made possible these shapes of the human spirit.”

Such an investigation of the distinct functions of Geist is different from these purely empirical investigations into the history of human activity; “philosophy . . . must be content with a general theoretical determination of the outlines of the image of this development,” rather than presenting “in concreto the great process of separation that comes to fullness” in the spiritual life of man.

It is the inherently theoretical form of philosophical investigation, “which finds its fulfillment only in the sharpness of the concept and in the clarity of ‘discursive’ thought,” that leaves philosophy unsatisfied with the merely phenomenal unity of Geist achieved within a “concrete” anthropogeny. A philosophy of symbolic forms instead seeks a formal unity, a basic principle of formation underlying all phenomena, no matter how diverse. And unlike that phenomenal unity, which is merely an empirical summation of Geist’s activities, this formal unity can only be arrived at phenomenologically, through a transcendental deduction. The material for that deduction, however, is the phenomenal unity of Geist, revealed in the fullness of its diverse “shapes of the human spirit.” Thus it is in anthropogeny that we must look to discover the basic principle of man, yet such a principle of Geist’s formal union with Leben is not to be found anywhere within that history.

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83 Cassirer, “Language and Myth,” 142.

84 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms I, 113.
Here a paradox emerges in the very heart of Cassirer’s philosophical investigations, for the only means by which a formal unity can be found in the anthropogenic evidence is if we already grant some such formal unity in the interpretation of that evidence. Inasmuch as the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms is understood by Cassirer to represent the phenomenological project to account for the Hegelian “whole” in its lived, dynamic human history, his system seems to require not only positing a metaphysical hypothesis of reality, but constantly superseding the hypothesized limits of that reality as Geist continues to develop. Philosophy seeks to both express and explain how man as a becoming is able to transcend his own epistemological limits as being, yet it can only do so from within those very limits lest it fall into an epistemological circle. Even the most fundamental relationship exposed by critical philosophy, the dialectic of Geist and Leben, has itself been shown to be a dynamic process that cannot be wholly described, but only posited and clarified within philosophy; this process is philosophy’s ground and goal, but it is not an *a priori* content of knowledge.

Cassirer’s own answer to this problem, we have seen, is the Kantian answer provided by the analytic universal: the very processes by which we interpret and organize Geist are revealed by a phenomenological analysis to be the forms of thought underlying Geist already. But this answer remains insufficient in regards to the question of origins, either of the individual symbolic forms or even of the birth of consciousness effected by the first separation of Geist and Leben. What we know of the human species tells us that these developments must have occurred in time, even if the specific history of these
developments is unknown, but as Cassirer shows, the critical method can never reveal the conditions of consciousness *ab initio*:

> We can never penetrate back to the point at which the first ray of intellectual consciousness broke out of the world of life; we cannot put our finger on the place at which language or myth, art or knowledge “arose.” For we know them all only as something already existing, as closed forms in which each particular carries the whole and is carried by it, and in which we therefore cannot indicate what is “earlier” or “later,” temporally “first” or “second.” All that remains open to us is the return from relatively complex to relatively simpler configurations of a particular form-world, yet in every such simple configuration, the law of the formation of the whole is already present and in effect.\(^85\)

Cassirer thus presents a hard limit to the scope of his critical philosophy. We are of necessity bound to our human perspective, but for this reason we cannot truly conceive of the world outside of or apart from those very symbolic forms that are already active within us. Even the evolution of the symbolic forms is closed to us since we can only understand those forms through our already-existent capacity for symbolic formation, and to understand any true difference from those forms would precisely require the viewpoints of forms other than the ones we have. So, while from our current perspective we can make some sense of the symbolic formation at work in less developed thinking, we cannot, it would seem, make sense of the development of symbolic formation itself, either in the origins of consciousness or even in the radical development of new functions of symbolic formation. Consequently, neither the origin nor the truly novel development of symbolic forms would seem to be explainable without once again falling into a circular reasoning, for the categorical function must critically stand *a priori* to its conceptual expression in the

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\(^85\) Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 4, 38.
symbol, and yet the function of symbolic formation is only ever revealed through the symbols it produces.

For this reason Cassirer also argues that there is no fundamental, original form of consciousness to which we could reduce all the other forms, though his investigations in “Language and Myth” seem to deny this conclusion outright:

Here, a law reveals itself that is equally valid for all symbolic forms and that essentially determines their development. None of them immediately emerges as a separate, independent, and recognizable configuration, but each gradually detaches itself from the common mother earth of myth. All of the contents of spirit, however much we are able to systematically assign them to their own domain and base them on their own autonomous “principles,” are factually first given to us only in this interpenetration.⁸⁶

Cassirer states that “a law reveals itself” by which all symbolic forms are originally interpenetrated with myth, and only in the course of a gradual development are these other forms able to “detach” themselves and reveal their autonomous place in the systematic whole of symbolic formation. In this manner Cassirer refrains from claiming that the other symbolic forms originate later than myth, but it is not clear that we should say they have their same characteristic “form” before they have achieved their independence from myth.

What is suggested instead is that the forms we have are not the discrete elements of a stable whole of human existence, but rather that the very system of symbolic formation, the complex whole of Geist, is a dynamic process. It is true that this process has provided us viewpoints, particularly the theoretical viewpoint, by which we can retrospectively observe the history of these symbolic forms from their incipient emergence to the modern day, and thus that we can see the defining principle of the finished form at work both in its

“relatively complex” and “relatively simpler configurations.” But this again would be a static picture of a dynamic process, and Cassirer’s investigations in this essay demonstrate that the full account of the symbolic forms must be dynamic.

In this light, the paradox in Cassirer’s philosophy stems from the conflict between the ultimately static system of knowledge asserted by theoretical thinking (which, again, is the characteristic form of critical philosophy) and the actual dynamic process of becoming that is revealed within symbolic formation. A critical phenomenology that is limited to this static picture can never look beyond the unities that theoretical thinking imposes. This apparent limitation leads Cassirer to ask at the outset of “Language and Myth” whether philosophy can even investigate the question of the historical emergence of the forms of language and myth, limited as it is to a historically posterior viewpoint guided by theoretical thinking and the discursive tools of epistemology and logic:

Is there a way other than the history of language and the history of religion for us to enter deeper into the spiritual genesis, into the origin of primary linguistic and religious concepts? Or does the insight into the psychological and historical emergence of these concepts fall together with the insight into their spiritual essence, into their fundamental signification and function? . . . Only in this expansion [of logical inquiry into the roots of language and religion], only in this apparent impingement on the sphere of logical tasks will philosophy’s own determination be clearly denoted and will the sphere of pure theoretical knowledge clearly delimit itself over against other domains of spiritual existence and spiritual forming.87

What Cassirer’s theoretical inquiry reveals, however, is that the history of Geist is equally the history of symbolic formation – and likewise then the history of Leben. The form of theoretical thinking always seeks to construct the whole as a system of mutually defining

87 Ibid, 143–44.
particulars, but the moment philosophy asks about the development of symbolic formation
it necessarily moves beyond the whole of this empirical system to the more complex and
comprehensive whole of the dialectic.

This is precisely what Cassirer denies to philosophical investigation: it cannot
resolve the dialectic itself, because the very nature of the dialectic is to constantly go
beyond the bounds of immanence that constrain all human inquiry. Philosophy seeks to
understand the basic phenomenon of symbolic formation “in itself”, but to do so would
require philosophy to overstep the fundamental limit of critical inquiry: “The philosophy
of symbolic forms seeks to represent the nature and full development of this primary
phenomenon, but it naturally cannot go back to its ‘Why,’ and it does not raise this
question, but recognizes here the necessary and inescapable ‘limit of conceptualization’.”

\(88\) Geist in all its forms appears as a veil over reality, and Cassirer admits that “the true, the
profoundest task of a philosophy of culture . . . seems precisely to consist in raising this
veil,” but the “specific organ of philosophy . . . rebels against this task.”\(^{89}\) While on the
one hand philosophical inquiry remains unfulfilled by the purely phenomenal investigation
of Geist, it would methodically limit itself from any purely metaphysical inquiry on the
other. The symbolic forms would then seem to be the happy medium between Geist and
Leben, but in truth – in their wholeness – they assert the very dialectic of Geist and Leben,
existence and reality, and every other metaphysical opposition. Philosophical inquiry can
as little escape this dialectic as it can escape life itself, but so long as it methodologically

\(^{88}\) Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 225.

\(^{89}\) Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 1, 113.
limits itself to the pure products of symbolic formation it remains distant from the life-processes that it means to describe. If the goal of philosophy is in fact to reveal the form of man’s own activity, we must conclude that a philosophy that does not ground itself in the whole, in reality, is ultimately false – because the whole is the true.

Nonetheless, Cassirer sometimes recognizes that to achieve the unity of the whole philosophy must ask a question “which lies beyond all these particular theoretical analyses, which arises at their limit and which . . . necessarily goes beyond this limit.”\(^90\) The organ of philosophy does not in fact appear to be exhausted by the form of theoretical thinking nor limited to the immanent products of Geist, for it must also come to terms with its very goal, its telos: “We cannot build up a philosophy of culture by mere formal and logical means. . . . The philosophy of culture may be called a study of forms; but all these forms cannot be understood without relating them to a common goal.”\(^91\) Thus we must ask, “What is this whole of spiritual culture? What is its end, its goal, its meaning?”\(^92\) – and in these linked questions Cassirer confirms what his previous investigations into the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms had denied: that the end, meaning, and whole of Geist are one, and only through their revelation can the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms be fulfilled.

Such a revelation must come from beyond the immanent limits of theoretical thinking. In speaking of this problem at the end of “On the Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms,” Cassirer again observes the critical limitation that “we can only obtain back from

\(^90\) Cassirer, “The Concept of Philosophy,” 57.

\(^91\) Cassirer, “Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture,” 81.

\(^92\) Cassirer, “The Concept of Philosophy,” 57.
these unities of life the contents that we have previously introduced into them,” but now further adduces that “man is not limited by this immanent boundary to his perception and action, but ventures to fly beyond them”; it is the transcendence beyond the “circle of human activity,” that double determination of self and world, that “truly opens up the sphere of the mind.” It is indeed the very act of symbolic formation that defines man, yet now no longer in his immanent “nature” but in his transcendent freedom: “In this act of becoming conscious and of making himself conscious we do not find the power of fate which governs organic processes. Here we attain the realm of freedom. The true and highest achievement of every ‘symbolic form’ consists in its contribution toward this goal; . . . every symbolic form works toward the transition from the realm of ‘nature’ to that of ‘freedom’.” It is then in freedom and its particular role within the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms that we must look to discover the true answer to the end, meaning, and whole of human existence.

93 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 110–11.
94 Ibid, 111.
CHAPTER 6
THE METAPHYSICAL BASIS OF CASSIRER’S CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY

1. Cassirer’s Esoteric Metaphysics of the Whole

The question of the whole as it is revealed within the dialectic of Geist and Leben poses a problem that transcends the limits of a critical philosophy, because the knowledge it seeks is of a noumenal “reality” that lies beyond our merely phenomenal existence. The conception of reality, of Leben, is rooted for Cassirer in the whole, but he consistently dismisses every metaphysical claim of what this whole is as stemming from a fundamental error of reasoning that a sound critical philosophy must carefully eschew. We have seen, for instance, the great pains Cassirer takes in demonstrating how the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms escapes the reliance upon synthetic universals that typically characterizes systematic philosophy.\(^1\) Thus, rather than building his system up from the starting point of some particular hypothesis of reality, Cassirer takes seriously the Kantian demand for an analytic universal through which our knowledge and experience of the world is not so much constructed as deciphered. To call his own philosophical system a metaphysical theory may thus invite misunderstanding, insofar as the term “metaphysics” usually refers to those hypothetical assumptions about reality that are necessarily asserted within any particular viewpoint. The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, on the other hand, cannot rest content without considering the plurality of all viewpoints, and, inasmuch as these viewpoints continue to develop and be created, the analytic universal that forms the “whole” of this

\(^1\) Cf. Section 2 of Chapter 5.
philosophy must be continually sought as the dynamic principle by which Leben becomes aware of itself as Geist.

The becoming-self-aware (Gewahrwerden) that Cassirer has in mind derives from the Goethean idea that one knows oneself most fully through one’s work ("know your work and know ‘yourself’ in your work")\(^2\), which he also connects to Simmel’s turn to the idea.\(^3\) Inasmuch as Cassirer can be said to have a metaphysics,\(^4\) it is rooted in the necessary function of this work, which is the one Urphänomen that is specific to Geist\(^5\): “Our metaphysics: life’s becoming truly aware [Gewahrwerden]. Life’s going back to its ‘ground’ means of course its destruction ['zu Grunde gehen'], but it is preserved in the sphere of geist.”\(^6\) The search for Geist’s “ground” in the analytic universal is the search for


\(^3\) Ibid; as noted in Section 4 of Chapter 4, Cassirer regarded Simmel’s metaphysics as that coming closest to his own conception, especially in his treatment of the turn to the idea.

\(^4\) As Donald Philip Verene argues, Cassirer is characteristically “metaphysics-shy” in that his approach to man is foremost that of an empirical realist; cf. Donald Philip Verene, “Cassirer’s Metaphysics,” in *The Symbolic Construction of Reality: The Legacy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Jeffrey A. Barash (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 93–94. Nonetheless, Verene admits that “Cassirer does have a metaphysics but it is only partially developed” (ibid, 101), in part because it is caught between a Kantian critical philosophy and a Hegelian speculative philosophy: “Cassirer frustrates the metaphysically inclined reader because he himself was frustrated” (ibid, 95). The problem for Cassirer, states Verene, is that neither Kant nor Hegel succeeds in penetrating beyond the given *qua* given, when this is precisely what Cassirer requires of the analytic universal for his philosophy: “To discover what the ‘given’ is, and how the given is itself given, is the key to the metaphysics of symbolic forms” (ibid, 96).

\(^5\) As Verene discusses, Cassirer’s elaboration on the Urphänomen of work displays his original contribution to metaphysics: “Work is the element in human affairs that is directly connected to the inner form of the given – the functional bond, as it were, of the particular and the universal. The sphere of work is the ground of what is true and of what is real for Cassirer, and it is what sets his philosophy apart from most of what has occurred in philosophy since” (ibid, 102). Cf. also Donald Phillip Verene, *The Origins of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Kant, Hegel, and Cassirer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 69–70.

all those guiding functions by which the double movement of separation and mediation destroys the simple unity of Leben in order to reunify it in the double determination of self and world. It is in this way, as Cassirer echoes Hegel, that “The substance of life has become a subject, the pure sphere of meaning, above both the thing and the personal.”\(^7\)

These guiding functions, expressed in their relative generality, are nothing other than the symbolic forms themselves, which in their totality of different characteristic functions of transformation constitute the analytic universal of Geist:

This primary phenomenon of the production and transformation of forms corresponds to the basic phenomenon of the symbolic function. . . . Each function embraces this process within its own characteristic motion, within its own characteristic shaping and changing of shapes. The only way for us to make this whole “primordial process” present to us is by reference to the totality of this specific function.\(^8\)

The sense of totality here is neither that of a collection nor even an amalgamation of different individual functions, as if the individual functions stood prior to a secondary, derived whole. Rather, Cassirer understands this whole as a “primordial process” within which the individual functions do not so much diverge into separate entities as participate in characteristically distinct ways. An individual function of Geist is thence a “part” in that it only represents a partial aspect of the total process, but that process, being the defining analytic universal of the entire system, is the whole by which the place within the system of each functional “part” may be derived: “it is precisely this relation of the ‘part’ to the

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\(^7\) Ibid, 220.


University Press, 1996), 219–220. Further references will be to pages 191–220 of the collected volume, \textit{Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4}. 

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‘whole’ that is fundamentally surpassed in the true syntheses of consciousness. Here the whole does not originate in the parts, it constitutes them and gives them their essential meaning.”9 The whole, then, is fundamental and primary; it is the functional unity of the system itself through which all other functions find their relative – that is, relational – place. This is the manner in which the whole of Geist, in its functional sense as the dynamic process of Leben’s Gewahrwerden, relates to the particular symbolic forms.

One of the few explicitly metaphysical claims that Cassirer appears to make in The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms is the claim of the whole itself, but in truth this is only the logical condition of the analytic universal under which Geist as such is possible. Similar to the fundamental hypothesis of reality in Peirce’s method of science, the whole is not known or knowable immediately, but instead serves as the basic hypothetical condition by which knowledge is possible in any of its particular forms:

We start with the concept of the whole: the whole is the true (Hegel). But the truth of the whole can always only be grasped in a particular “aspect.” This is “knowledge” in the broadest sense – “seeing” the whole “in” an aspect, through the medium of this aspect. With this, the problem of representation becomes the central problem of knowledge.10

In beginning his notes for the fourth volume with Hegel’s famous dictum, Cassirer would seem to be endorsing the absolutizing attempt to unify the critical distinction of function and concept that constitutes the prime transcendental error of the Hegelian system.11

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10 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 193.

11 Cf. Section 2 of Chapter 3; Cassirer had already pointed out the logically reductive quality of Hegel’s particular attempt at an absolute system in his introduction to the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: “Of all cultural forms, only that of logic, the concept, cognition, seems to enjoy a true and authentic autonomy. . . . So that, with all Hegel’s endeavor to apprehend the specific differentiations of the spirit, he ultimately refers and reduces its whole content and capacity to a single dimension – and its profoundest
However, in the next breath Cassirer adds the basic condition that the whole is never grasped in itself, but only in the “aspect” of the particular; this process, taken in its generality, constitutes “‘knowledge’ in the broadest sense.” Just as the hypothesis of reality guides scientific inquiry in Peirce without ever being recovered in existence, this whole can never be an immediate element of existence, but rather functions as the logically necessary macrocosmic telos of every particular microcosmic element of Geist. Such a whole is no mere synthetic universal reflecting some determinate hypothesis of reality, but is precisely that analytic universal uncovered in and through every particular form of knowledge.

In this way, “the concept of the whole” is critically successful whereas Peirce’s fundamental hypothesis falters, for Cassirer’s concept treats reality as a dynamic process of becoming rather than a determinate state of being. Thus, instead of focusing on whether our knowledge conforms to being in the objective uncertainty of infinite inquiry, the focus of Symbolic Idealism (in a similar sense to Climacus’ subjective inquiry) is on how the form of being appears in the form of knowledge, how physis is represented as logos, how Leben is transformed into Geist. This concept of the whole that is only grasped in the particular conditioned by that whole thus brings with it the very dialectic of Geist and Leben. As we have seen, the realm of Geist can never recover its absolute source in Leben, but neither can Geist be properly conceived apart from Leben as its ground and content and true meaning are apprehended only in relation to this dimension” (Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 195).

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12 Cf. Section 2 of Chapter 5.

13 Cf. Section 4 of Chapter 3 and Section 2 of Chapter 5.

14 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 195.
logically necessary correlate. Through this dialectic Hegel’s bold metaphysical conjecture that the whole is the true is taken in its full teleological sense, but is at the same time tempered into an epistemologically secure hypothesis of the *function* (rather than the *substance*) of reality. This hypothesis of a holistic function dynamically linking *Geist* and *Leben* is revealed here to be the basic hypothesis of the critical phenomenology that is termed the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, and furthermore avoids the flaw of Peirce’s basic hypothesis by treating reality as a functional and analytic universal rather than a substantial and synthetic one.

The fundamental hypothesis for Cassirer therefore preserves the dialectic of *Geist* and *Leben*, rather than eliminating it as happens in every hypothesis derived from a synthetic universal. It is for this reason, Cassirer argues, that neither the “identity theory” of knowledge, in which knowledge and being are taken to be actually the same, nor the *eidolon* theory of knowledge, in which being is regarded as the direct cause of knowledge, are critically feasible hypotheses of reality, for both effectively eliminate the dialectic of knowledge (*Geist*) and being (*Leben*) by reducing one to the other. This dialectic must instead be preserved by understanding knowledge as the *representation* of being – though this dialectic is thereby destined to become “the central problem of knowledge.” The representation theory does not treat knowledge as identical to or even derivative of being,

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15 This is also why, even as Cassirer adopts Hegel’s dictum that the whole is the true, it is an impossibility to eliminate this fundamental dialectic in some final synthesis. As Verene points out, “The relationship of life and *Geist* is not one-way. It is bidirectional because *Geist* is continually in the process of reemerging from life. Life and *Geist* are held together as two necessary moments of a dialectic that is parallel to Hegel’s in-itself and for-itself. Life and *Geist* are in a continual dialectic and life is not *aufgehoben* – literally, taken up – in *Geist*, as with Hegel” (“Cassirer’s Metaphysics,” 99).


17 Ibid, 193, as quoted above.
but rather treats their relation as “a purely significative relation, a meaning relation, or, as we would say, a symbolic relation”\(^\text{18}\) in which “‘Knowledge’ and ‘being’ are differentiated and yet even in this differentiation . . . are necessarily and correlatively related to each other.”\(^\text{19}\) Their relation is neither one of identity nor pure difference, but rather of knowledge’s “participation” (methexis) in being, whether that is understood in the static Platonic sense of the universal idea grasped within the particular phenomenon (“signification”), or the dynamic Aristotelian sense of the particular manifestation of a universal form (“expression”).

These three interrelated functions of representation, signification, and expression constitute the tripartite phenomenological division of symbolic formation in the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. None is more or less primary than the others, such that one could be wholly reduced to another, but rather each expresses a particular meaningful dimension of the total function of symbolic formation by which Leben comes to know itself in Geist. Nonetheless, each of these functions seems to assert its primacy when we look at the whole from the “perspective” of that particular function. For instance, expression would seem to have a phenomenological-formative primacy, in that it is through the expressive function that the emergence of Geist is understood as a process of becoming;\(^\text{20}\) on the other hand, signification would seem to have a critical-philosophical

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 197.

\(^{19}\) Ibid, 197–98.

\(^{20}\) This is, as we saw in Section 1 of Chapter 4, the sense of primacy given to myth in Cassirer’s “Language and Myth,” where myth, representative of the expressive function, is seen to have a developmental primacy over representation and signification, which themselves can only emerge out of the original expressions of mythic thinking. Cf. Ernst Cassirer, “Language and Myth: A Contribution to the Problem of the Names of the Gods,” in *The Warburg Years (1919–1933): Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology*, trans. S. G. Lofts and A. Calcagno (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013; originally published in German in 1925).
primacy, in that it is only through the critical philosophy revealed through the conceptual system-building of signification that the disparate activities of the different symbolic forms can be understood in their relations to one another. As for the representative function, its apparent primacy is symbolic, in that it demonstrates the functional necessity of a methexis of knowledge and being which, as we have just seen, is primary to any later conceptual division of the expressive and significative functions. These three functions then collectively correspond to those three different terms used by Cassirer in different places to refer to his own philosophical perspective: expressively, he is a phenomenologist (in the Hegelian sense	extsuperscript{21}); significatively, he is a critical philosopher (in the Kantian sense); representatively, he is a Symbolic Idealist (in his own original sense). Collectively, these three dimensions find their totality in the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.

This brings us back to the question of what the analytic universal, that “basic phenomenon of the symbolic function” that is only revealed in the totality of these different sub-functions, actually is. We have seen that this analytic universal functions as the explanatory principle of the “truth of the whole,” by which the whole of knowledge can be grasped within the particular aspect. In this sense, the analytic universal asserts what Cassirer calls the “organic” character of knowledge: “Knowledge is ‘organic’ insofar as every part is conditioned by the whole and can be made ‘understandable’ only by reference

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. Section 2 of Chapter 1; as Cassirer notes, for Hegel phenomenology is the “basis of all philosophical knowledge” in that it is the “unfolding” of the whole “which constitutes the being and the essence of science.” Though the sense of science is here that of the Hegelian totality, these expressions show that for Cassirer phenomenology is not yet science in its complete unfolding of the whole, but rather the “movement of becoming” through which science is “fulfilled and made intelligible.” 

Ernst Cassirer, \textit{The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Vol. 3: The Phenomenology of Knowledge}, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957; originally published in German in 1929), xiv. Thus, insofar as the expressive function focuses on the actual process of formation, “phenomenology” can be seen to collectively account for the movement of becoming at work in all symbolic formation, just as the representative and significative functions articulate every act of symbolic formation from their own specific viewpoints of the symbol and category respectively.
to the whole. It cannot be composed of pieces, of elements, except to the extent that each part already carries in itself the ‘form’ of the whole.”

This “organic” quality of knowledge describes how even though knowledge, i.e. symbolic representation, is only of the particular aspect, this part is nonetheless always found in relation to the whole and is thereby also an expression of that relation. This expression of the representative, symbolic character of the relation of part and whole is equally the expression of the fundamental and primary functional “essence” of the analytic universal, and thus brings with it the entire ineluctable dialectic of Geist and Leben that results from all genuine symbolic activity.

Cassirer’s characteristic use of the word “organic” is drawn from Leibniz and Goethe, whose philosophical influence on Cassirer is especially clear in this context. Like Aristotle, both of these philosophers place a special focus on the process of becoming that is especially evident within the development of organic life, but which functions more generally as the model of all dynamic formation. For Leibniz in particular, this organic quality is the defining characteristic of nature. As Leibniz describes, the monad or “simple substance”, through its relations to every other monad, is revealed to be a microcosm of the universe as a whole: “every simple substance has relations which express all the others and . . . is consequently a perpetual living mirror of the universe. . . . [T]here are a similar

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22 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 193.

23 R. H. Stephenson discusses Cassirer’s particular indebtedness to Goethe’s conception of symbolism as well as the ways in which he advances on this conception in “‘Eine zarte Differenz’: Cassirer on Goethe on the Symbol,” in Symbolic Forms and Cultural Studies: Ernst Cassirer’s Theory of Culture, ed. Cyrus Hamlin and John Michael Krois (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 157–184. In particular, Stephenson points out how Goethe’s conception of the Urphänomene provides the (metaphysical) framework of Cassirer’s own conception of symbolic formation (ibid, 160–171), as discussed below.

24 As Cassirer notes, in Aristotle the concept of eidos is “the organic form . . . as realization of the possible – as the totality of configuration. . . . The form as a whole explicates itself in the serial order of becoming. It is the dynamic form which can ‘appear’ only in the process of becoming” (Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 198).
infinite number of universes which are, nevertheless, only the aspects of a single one, as seen from the special point of view of each Monad.”

Something is “organic”, as Leibniz uses the term, when this “perfect order” of relations is manifest in each part of the whole, which is to say when each part is equally capable of representing in its relations this one whole universe. Thus the body of a living thing, unlike the body of an artificial creation of man, “is always organic, because every Monad is a mirror of the universe according to its own fashion, and, since the universe is regulated with perfect order, there must needs be order also in the representative.”

But this is as much to say that to be organic is to be a monad, for as a reflection of the universe the monad is not merely a fixed, “mechanical” arrangement of things, but reflects the dynamic, functional relation of part and whole: “The new whole [of the monad] is organic, not mechanical; its nature does not consist in the sum of its parts but is presupposed by its parts and constitutes the condition of the possibility of their nature and being.”

An organic whole, then, is the functional rather than substantial product of its parts, and it is in this sense that the unity expressed by the monad is to be understood.

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26 Ibid, § 63.


28 On the other hand, Cassirer’s usage must be carefully distinguished from what he describes as the “organological” view of history, which he ties to Vico, Hegel, and particularly Spengler; cf. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 4, 103–109. There is an important similarity between this organological view and Cassirer’s organicism, in that both work from a similar understanding that the particular “forms of meaning” are tied to a universal “process” of life (ibid, 103). However, the organological view has a “fundamental, systematic limit” in that it “attempts to solve problems concerning pure ‘meaning’ by relegating them to the level of occurrences and so transforms them into problems concerning actual events” (ibid, 104). This is thus a reversal of Cassirer’s own view, in that the organological view ends up looking for its justification in the particular expression of the moment rather than in the universal process of becoming. As Cassirer notes, this is particularly evident in Oswald Spengler’s philosophy, which draws the ultimate
The “organic” function that expresses this relation of part to whole, of a “multiplicity in the unity,” is nothing other than the analytic universal, knowledge of which constitutes the truth of the whole. The method for reaching an understanding of the analytic universal follows what Cassirer identifies as the Enlightenment path of reason: “The path of thought . . . leads from the particular to the general; but not even this progression would be possible unless every particular as such were already subordinated to a universal rule, unless from the first the general were contained, so to speak embodied, in the particular.” In this light, Leibniz’ conception of the monad would seem to make this embodiment explicit, for in the “simple substance” of the monad “there is no alternative between unity and multiplicity, but only their inner reciprocity and necessary correlation.” In this way the monad finds its “being” in a universal system of relations and is seen to exactly fulfill the Enlightenment requirement of reason, for the monad “is neither merely one nor merely many, but rather the ‘expression of multiplicity in unity’.”

The “essence” of the monad, this multorum in uno expressio, is not the synthetic universal of some kind of substantive Being but rather the representation (repraesentatio) of Leben

consequences of this position in its reduction of all the functions of thought to the function of pure expression (ibid, 106), thereby eliminating any notion of a transtemporal meaning. Such a result is in fact another example of substituting a synthetic universal, here of the historical present, for the analytic universal of Leben.

29 Leibniz, Monadology, § 13.
30 Cassirer, Philosophy of the Enlightenment, 21.
31 Ibid, 30.
32 Ibid.
in its various formations,\textsuperscript{33} such that “every individual substance is not only a fragment of the universe, it is the universe itself seen from a particular viewpoint.”\textsuperscript{34}

From the perspective of a monadology, the analytic universal is that “rule” through which the entire system of relations is expressed in each and every monad. Functionally speaking, this universal rule thereby represents the “ultimate unity” and “Final Cause” of the universe, which Leibniz calls God.\textsuperscript{35} Cassirer, without following Leibniz in this theistic identification, nonetheless identifies this functional unity of all things as the “Absolute”, the “primary phenomenon” of Leben:

We begin not with the primordial fact of so-called Being, but with that of “Life.” To this fact, however, this dispersion in a multitude of different directions is quite essential – and that precisely is the ‘primary phenomenon’ of Life itself, that it asserts its deep unshakable unity in this divergency. . . . The “Absolute,” “Being” insofar as it is conceivable for us at all, is taken up for us in the primary phenomenon of life.\textsuperscript{36}

As opposed to the univocal expression of Being in traditional metaphysics, we have seen that the unity of Leben is instead established through the dynamic, functional interrelationship of all things, and thereby is made manifest only through its “dispersion in a multitude of different directions.” It is in this sense that we can interpret Cassirer’s further remark that “The ‘Absolute’ is always simply the completely relative, which has been carried through to the end in a systematic overview,” for in its monadic derivation the Absolute is not the absolute other but the absolute whole, as revealed in its fundamental

\textsuperscript{33} Cf. Cassirer, \textit{Philosophy of Symbolic Forms} \textit{4}, 197: “the monad in its essence is \textit{repraesentatio – is multorum in uno expressio.”}

\textsuperscript{34} Cassirer, \textit{Philosophy of the Enlightenment}, 32–33.

\textsuperscript{35} Leibniz, \textit{Monadology}, §§ 47 and 90.

\textsuperscript{36} Cassirer, \textit{Philosophy of Symbolic Forms} \textit{4}, 225.
relation to every one of its organic parts.\textsuperscript{37} That this is equally true of those spiritual functions of \textit{Leben}, that “the absoluteness of \textit{geist} in particular can be nothing else and cannot try to be,”\textsuperscript{38} has already been shown in Cassirer’s earlier discussion of the organic nature of all knowledge, for insofar as each expression of \textit{Leben} organically discloses the whole system of relations, every formation of \textit{Geist} organically points to this same absolute whole.

We come now to the full expression of Cassirer’s esoteric metaphysics.\textsuperscript{39} The analytic universal, the functional “rule” of all relation, takes the place of God in Cassirer’s monadic conceptualization, and is at the same time disclosed as \textit{Leben}, the Absolute Monad, whose wholeness is both the expression and the \textit{telos} of all life, \textit{geistig} and otherwise. Cassirer’s conception of \textit{Leben} is fundamentally tied to the Goethean \textit{Urphänomen} of the monad,\textsuperscript{40} whose divergent formations relating part and whole are ever created and undone: “The highest that we can conceive of is life – the rotating movement of the \textit{monas} around itself. This motion consists in the creation of ever new forms – \textit{Gestalts} – and in their destruction.”\textsuperscript{41} As a creative and destructive force, \textit{Leben} is never properly taken as something fixed and determinate, but instead manifests as a function or energy – the second \textit{Urphänomen} of activity. This is not just a property of \textit{Leben} but

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 227.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{39} The justification for calling this metaphysics esoteric is that, although we can trace (and have traced) this complex conceptualization throughout Cassirer’s writings, he is never better than semi-opaque and often at least superficially inconsistent about his metaphysical commitments, and many of the clearest passages on his views were never prepared for publication by the philosopher himself.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Cf. Section 4 of Chapter 4 for a discussion of Goethe’s \textit{Urphänomene}.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Cassirer, \textit{Philosophy of Symbolic Forms} 4, 225–226; cf. also Goethe, \textit{Maximen und Reflexionen}, § 392 (\textit{Philosophy of Symbolic Forms} 4, 127): “The highest gift we have received from God and nature is life, the rotating movement of the monad about itself, knowing neither pause nor rest.”
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
equally of every monad, for the functional activity of each is based on what Cassirer calls the “principle of continuity”, through which the monad overcomes the separation of part and whole: “Continuity means unity in multiplicity, being in becoming, constancy in change. It signifies a connection which becomes manifest only in change and amid the unceasing mutation of qualities – a connection, therefore, which requires diversity just as fundamentally as unity.”  

The monad’s system of relationships constitutes its unity, but insofar as these are functional relationships it is only through their continuous and diverse activity that the monad is expressed. And the double movement of destruction and creation, separation and mediation (methexis), is in turn expressed in that list of metaphysical oppositions that Cassirer previously resolved into the fundamental dialectical opposition of Geist and Leben.  

The resulting formations of this activity constitute Goethe’s final Urphänomen of the work, the lasting symbol of the activity of the monad, for just as the unity of the functional relationship is expressed in the first Urphänomen of the whole, the multiplicity of the relationship must be expressed in the particular formation. Leben, in its role as the absolute unity of all relations, can thus be said to be the truth of the whole; but this whole is always and only made manifest through the constant activity of formation, in which each symbol organically represents that whole through its own particular mirror of the universe.  

This tripartite division of the Urphänomene as monad, activity, and work would then appear to correspond exactly to the functional division of expression, representation, and signification, in that each of these functions represents the viewpoint of the relation of part

42 Cassirer, Philosophy of the Enlightenment, 30.

43 Cf. Section 1 of Chapter 5.
and whole from the standpoint of the corresponding *Urphänomen*: from the perspective of the monadic whole, the part is an expression of that whole; from the perspective of pure activity, the representation of part and whole is the manifestation of their relation; from the perspective of the particular work or symbol, the whole is that which is signified through its inner rule of formation. And just as the totality of symbolic functions constitutes the dynamic whole of *Geist*, we may likewise understand these *Urphänomene* as three equal expressions for the same fundamental phenomenon, the monadic multiplicity within the unity of *Leben*, the universe as a whole.

2. The Metaphysics of *Geist*

If *Leben*, then, indicates Cassirer’s functional hypothesis of reality as revealed in its tripartite division into these *Urphänomene* and their corresponding sub-functions of symbolic formation, the role of *Geist* must be carefully considered. A certain ambiguity plagues Cassirer’s treatment of *Geist* just as it does his treatment of *Leben*, for at times he treats *Geist* as the spirit or intelligence of man, at times as the activity of that intelligence in the transformative double determination of self and world, and at times as the cultural products of that transformation. But we can now see that this ambiguity is a reflection of that same tripartite distinction of *Leben* and of the functional hypothesis of reality: these three treatments are of *Geist* as a functional whole, *Geist* as formative activity, and *Geist* as the particular products of its activity.\(^{44}\) *Geist* too is monadic – it is an organic part of the

\(^{44}\) In his essay, “The Missing Core of Cassirer’s Philosophy,” in *Symbolic Forms and Cultural Studies: Ernst Cassirer’s Theory of Culture*, ed. Cyrus Hamlin and John Michael Krois (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), Gideon Freudenthal similarly calls attention to the broad significance of these *Urphänomene* in Cassirer’s work, noting that they constitute the specific principles of Cassirer’s systematic
whole of Leben, it is a microcosm. This provides the metaphysical justification for why the
dialectic of Geist and Leben likewise expresses the dialectical relation of part and whole,
provided we bear in mind that the metaphysical unity of the whole is in reality the
functional unity of an analytic universal.

To return to Cassirer’s discussion of the definition of “man”, we are now prepared
to understand his claim that any such definition must “be understood as a functional one,
not a substantial one,” and that man’s defining characteristic “is not his metaphysical or
physical nature – but his work.” For it is through man’s work, through his activity and
the products of that activity, that man is understood in his functional essence as a monad,
and not strictly in terms of some physical or metaphysical substance. It is not that Cassirer
means to deny that man is a biological organism like any other animal, but rather to assert
that man is also the “animal symbolicum” – a biological organism whose activity goes
beyond Uexküll’s functional circle. Like all animals, man expresses his monadic whole
through his activity, but in his work man also creates lasting symbols that serve “as a
persisting remainder of activity” that collectively become “the kind of being which we call
culture or history.” In terms of Cassirer’s metaphysics, symbolic formation is the defining
activity of Geist and the particular function by which man represents himself, i.e. becomes
separated from the functional circle of Leben in order to be reestablished in the double

“constructivism” through which all things, and especially man himself, are seen to be rooted in activity: “As
in all construction, so also here Cassirer prefers such theories that explain the existence of entities as a result
of activity, hence also the existence of the human subject as the result of his own activity” (ibid, 208).

45 Cf. Section 1 of Chapter 5.


47 Ibid, 26; cf. also Section 1 of Chapter 1 and Section 3 of Chapter 4.

48 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 158.
determination of subject and object. This is tied to Cassirer’s concept of “symbolic pregnancy” in the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, in which no phenomenon is simply given, but rather, in precisely the sense of the Leibnizian monad, is always found to relate beyond itself to some “determinate order of meaning” provided by its underlying functional unity in *Leben*: “In its full actuality, its living totality, it is at the same time life in meaning.” But even though the activity of symbolic formation is a function of *Leben* itself (as is all activity), the resulting symbols of this double movement are never more than ciphers of the whole; the pregnant meaning of the symbol always goes beyond the particular determination of subject and object to its pure source in the activity of *Geist*. From this perspective, man is his activity, his being is a becoming; he is, in the sense of Anti-Climacus, the active relation of the self to its own self, constituted by that

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49 Cf. Section 3 of Chapter 4.

50 Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 3, 202. Freudenthal calls attention to the roots of this term in Leibniz’ monadology in order to set up his objection that a monadic conception of the symbol is incapable of accounting for any historical development of symbolic formation – a similar concern as that discussed in Section 3 of Chapter 5. However, Freudenthal’s understanding of the monadic relation of the symbol to the whole appears to be a static one, in which the monad contains all of its future states as definite predicates of its complete, analytic concept: “the problem is that in Leibniz’ philosophy the substance is ‘pregnant’ with the future precisely because all future states of the substance are already presently involved in it. . . . Analyticity and development of knowledge and its forms . . . exclude each other” (“The Missing Core of Cassirer’s Philosophy,” 211). However, insofar as Cassirer understands the monadic whole to be an analytic universal, the symbolic pregnancy of a symbol is not its relation to a fixed conception of its being (which for Cassirer is never fixed), but rather to a dynamic conception of its underlying possibilities of expression, which can only be determined through the actual history of symbolic formation. The development of the symbolic forms is not predetermined by life or its symbols, but rather is the free unfolding of life in its own self-perception (cf. Section 2 of Chapter 7).

51 Stephenson points out that Barbara Naumann, in showing the close tie between Cassirer’s concept of symbolic pregnancy and Goethe’s understanding of the *Urphänomene*, reaches the same conclusion in *Philosophie und Poetik des Symbols: Cassirer und Goethe* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1998), 94: “‘Symbolic pregnancy’ as reciprocal determination and movement is for Cassirer characterized by ultimate impenetrability and is to that extent apriori. It is inherent in every process of symbolization and, as a consequence, in Cassirer’s sense, inherent in every production of meaning” (quoted and translated in Stephenson, “Cassirer on Goethe on the Symbol,” 163).
whole towards which he is always in relation but can only ever reach in the “passion” of his momentary activity.\(^{52}\)

This brings us back to the “philosophy of man”, Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, “a philosophy which would give us insight into the fundamental structure of each of these human activities, and which at the same time would enable us to understand them as an organic whole.”\(^{53}\) As the diverse dynamic functions of man’s double determination of self and world, the symbolic forms represent the organic parts of the functional whole of \textit{Geist}. And insofar as \textit{Geist} is in turn an organic part of \textit{Leben}, and specifically represents \textit{Leben}’s function of self-apprehension,\(^{54}\) the symbolic forms thereby function as the “organs” by which \textit{Leben} – reality – is made “visible” to itself in man:

Individual symbolic forms are not imitations of this reality but \textit{organs} of it, as it is only through them that reality is rendered into the object of spiritual vision and so is able to become \textit{visible} as such. The question as to what beings in themselves are beyond these . . . must now be silenced.\(^{55}\)

As a critical philosophy, the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms can only objectively apprehend the noumenal reality of \textit{Leben} in its phenomenal appearance in the symbols of \textit{Geist}, but the functional hypothesis of reality necessitates that every symbolic form is also an organic part of the whole. It is \textit{Leben} itself that is made visible as phenomenal knowledge by the symbolic forms, which transforms this whole into the particular “objects” or symbols of \textit{Geist}. But to speak of the “being” of \textit{Leben} beyond its appearance in the symbol would be a transcendental error.

\(^{52}\) Cf. Section 4 of Chapter 3.

\(^{53}\) Cassirer, \textit{Essay on Man}, 68.

\(^{54}\) Cf. Section 4 of Chapter 4.

Here again we see that reality’s noumenal quality prevents us from knowing it apart from how it is made visible to Geist as a phenomenal object produced by the individual symbolic forms, the “organs” of reality. The inner dialectical conflict of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms directly stems from this problem, for the symbol is both an expression of the phenomenological function of symbolic formation as well as the particular signification of an object within a phenomenal system of knowledge. It is through these interconnected functions, however, that knowledge comes to represent the expression of reality in terms of “meaning” or significance: “in the concept of representation we have moved from the level of simple reality to the level of meaning: meaning is the basic category through which we are able to define ‘being’ and ‘reality’.”\(^{56}\) Such a transformation of reality into meaning, Leben into Geist, is that same intellectual turnabout that has been discussed.\(^{57}\) The pride of place of the symbol is that it is only in symbolism that a mediation – a methexis – between these two is accomplished: “For ‘symbolism,’ as we understand it, is in fact actually the true mediation of the seeming opposition. It is . . . the participation of ‘appearance’ in the ‘idea,’ of ‘life’ in ‘thought,’ of the eternal flux in the created form.”\(^{58}\) But to assert this mediation is one thing, to account for it is something else – and while we can say we “know” the “meaning” of a thing, to understand the underlying function of meaning-making is the true goal of a Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. For if symbols are the particular products of Geist, and symbolic formation its activity, the truth of its whole is

\(^{56}\) Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 4, 197.

\(^{57}\) Cf. Section 3 of Chapter 4.

\(^{58}\) Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 4, 227.
the symbolic pregnancy, the underlying functional unity of symbolic formation revealed within the whole history of anthropogeny.

Again, Cassirer’s philosophical method does not begin by posing question-begging certainties of synthetic universals, but instead begins with examining the cultural evidence itself in all of its diversity and seeking the analytic universal within it. This method is equally visible in Cassirer’s works on theoretical science as it is in his investigations of anthropology and intellectual history. In light of his metaphysics we can also see that this is the only approach to “reality” that is potentially free from any transcendental error, for the only metaphysical unity that is allowed is a functional unity by which the diverse symbols of culture are treated not as mere phenomena of being but instead as signs of a more fundamental process of becoming. The justification for such a unity, moreover, is simply that the search for reality is the search for the whole, and thus whatever unites everything together serves as the relational definition of the whole.

It is for this reason that Cassirer, like Leibniz, treats the mathematical function as the basic model for his conception of the analytic universal, the monadic whole. Insofar as the function is a symbolic representation of the dynamic relationship between different terms, it provides a conceptual framework for the relational definition of the whole that Cassirer seeks behind the various phenomenal symbols of Geist. Cassirer describes this relational nature of the function in his early definition of the concept in Substance and Function:

All mathematical conceptual construction sets itself a double task, in fact, the task of the analysis of a certain relational complex into elementary types of relation and the synthesis of these simpler types and laws of construction into relations of higher orders. . . . The “elements” here joined into new unities are themselves not extensive magnitudes which are combined as
“parts” of a whole, but are forms of function which reciprocally determine each other and unite into a system of dependencies.\(^{59}\)

Throughout this early text we already see much of Cassirer’s later philosophical positions being expressed.\(^{60}\) Here, the double task of analysis and synthesis, by which an initial whole of relations is broken down in order to reformulate them into new unities, is clearly echoed by symbolic formation’s double movement of separation and mediation (i.e. participation) we have discussed.\(^{61}\) Furthermore, Cassirer’s monadic conception of the relation of part and whole is already present and in fact clarified through the functional conception presented in this text. As this passage points out, the particular elements of a function are not conceived in terms of their “extensive magnitudes”, as if they had some independent meaning (or “being”) apart from their reciprocal relations with every other element. Functionally speaking, the part has no meaning outside of its relations to the whole, and the whole in turn is nothing other than the functional expression of these relations. Here again the true is the whole, and just like in the dynamic function of the analytic universal, the particular element only finds its truth in its functional relation to that whole:

The question here can never be how we go from the parts to the whole, but how we go from the whole to the parts. The elements never “subsist” outside of every form of connection, so that the attempt to deduce the possible ways of connection from them moves in a circle. Only the total result itself is “real” in the sense of experience and of psychological process, while its

\(^{59}\) Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function*, in “Substance and Function” and “Einstein’s Theory of Relativity,” trans. Williams Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1923; originally published in German in 1910), 75–76.

\(^{60}\) Verene particularly emphasizes the significance of *Symbol and Function* in developing the conceptual framework for the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms; cf. Verene, “Cassirer’s Metaphysics,” 96–98. The most complete critical discussion in English of Cassirer’s early philosophical works is found in Gregory Moynahan, *Ernst Cassirer and the Critical Science of Germany, 1899–1919* (London: Anthem, 2013), which devotes a chapter to this text (122–156).

\(^{61}\) Cf. Section 3 of Chapter 4.
individual components have only the value of hypothetical assumptions. Their value and justification accordingly is to be measured by whether they are able to represent and reconstruct in their combination the totality of the phenomena.⁶²

Insofar as reality means the complex totality of all things, it becomes nonsensical to speak of the reality of a particular element as somehow independent of that whole. As Cassirer indicates, such an element has only a hypothetical value when considered individually, in that the real measure of its truth is not in the element itself but in its potential relations to everything else.⁶³

The particular element, then, serves as a hypothetical assumption of the whole function of reality, in that our understanding of the particular includes at least implicitly some notion of how that particular relates to other particulars within the whole. And while we cannot move “from the parts to the whole” without begging the question, this is nonetheless the means by which empirical scientific inquiry (as in Peirce’s method of science) seeks to ascertain the underlying reality of our phenomenal experience: a hypothesis is constructed about reality based upon particular evidence, and, insofar as the hypothesis appears to hold, this then becomes a model of reality. The key advancement in Cassirer’s philosophy is that this model of reality is always functional, because reality is conceived in the light of the analytic universal as the relational whole of the monad. Thus, in place of the substantive conception of reality that survives even in Peirce, the assumed

⁶² Cassirer, Substance and Function, 335.

⁶³ In his interpretation of this passage, Moynahan further emphasizes how “reality proves itself to be an ideal function, which links the certainly given – but only amorphously known – plenum of all possible realities to the particular ‘hypothesis’ of the immediately given Real” (Moynahan, Ernst Cassirer and the Critical Science of Germany, 148); in a similar way, he also describes Cassirer’s notion of reality as “an ideal functional concept that, as in Leibniz and Cohen, mediates between a particular experience of the Real and an absolute possible horizon of reality” (ibid, 140).
hypotheses drawn from the particular are never allowed by Cassirer to become reified as absolute synthetic universals, but instead are subject to a critical reduction to the logical rules of relation they express, which in turn make up the distinct world-picture of each symbolic form. Inasmuch as we can then talk about the whole of reality, or Leben as such, it must be in terms of the complex functional whole of the symbolic forms – that is, Geist. And insofar as philosophy strives to understand Geist as this complex whole of symbolic formation, it aims at nothing other than the functional model of the whole of Leben.

In this same way each symbolic form is seen to be a particular sub-function of Geist that aims to model Leben in its own characteristic way, none of which can claim to model this reality in full. Cassirer thereby further illustrates this fundamentally dynamic conception of reality in terms of the constant flux of the subjective and objective in experience, based upon the changing conceptions of what is taken as an unfixed variable of the total function of reality and what instead is hypothetically assumed to be fixed:

[T]here are no absolutely changeable elements of experience at any stage of knowledge we have reached, any more than there are absolutely constant elements. A content can only be known as changeable with reference to another, with which it is compared, and which at first claims permanent existence for itself. At the same time, the possibility always remains that this second content will be corrected by a third, and thus may no longer hold as a true and perfect expression of objectivity, but as a mere partial expression of being. Thus we are not concerned here with a fixed line of division, separating two eternally sundered fields of reality, but with a moving limit, which constantly shifts in the progress of knowledge. . . . Only this mutual act of correction remains standing, only this function of comparison persists, while the material content of the two fields is in constant flux.

64 Cf. Section 2 of Chapter 5.

65 Cassirer, Substance and Function, 273–74.
The “comparative” function between two given elements of experience only exists in the terms of those elements, but as Cassirer has shown it is the relation and not the individual elements of the relation that is metaphysically primary. For this reason, the notion of a fixed term can only be understood in terms of the relation itself and not as anything absolute. In the same manner as a partial function treats certain variables of the whole complex function as constant in order to examine the particular relationships that hold between the remaining variable terms, the hypothetical assumption of some constant element of experience serves to highlight how other elements of experience are seen to change in comparison. A constant element of experience is taken as a reference point by which the relative changes in other elements become knowable. The partial function they reveal thus takes on the form of a logical rule of relation within the system as a whole.

The most fundamental logical rules of a system of knowledge are the functional “invariants” within that system, those functional connections that appear to hold in every possible situation; together they constitute the world-picture of that system, and their identification is therefore tantamount to understanding the system as a whole. In the empirical understanding of science, for instance, Kant’s deduction shows that underlying every principle of nature is a general concept of the pure understanding, which itself is the expression of a logical category of judgment. Each of these categories functions as an invariant within the system of theoretical thinking, and thus their deduction serves as the

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66 Moynahan points out that this same functional primacy prohibits privileging either the subject or the object, since these are equally derivative of the whole: “The functional concept exists before any division of subject and object, so that Cassirer can claim it is equally valid in each realm” (Moynahan, Ernst Cassirer and the Critical Science of Germany, 129). This same consideration is at the root of the double determination of the symbol as subject-object; cf. Section 3 of Chapter 4.

67 In the Wittgensteinean sense; cf. Section 4 of Chapter 3.
systematic foundation for all possible knowledge within this system. It is for this reason that Cassirer sees the deduction of invariants as the real aim of every attempt to understand the world: “The goal of all empirical knowledge lies in gaining ultimate invariants as the necessary and constitutive factors in each empirical judgment.” This further emphasizes the importance of Kant’s critical method for the possibility of any actual experience, for it is only through such functional invariants that the constant flux of reality is able to take on form and be expressed in the particular symbol.

However, as Cassirer points out, the only absolute reference point is the functional whole, which is reality itself; every other hypothetical assumption of a reference point, including every invariant, is just a means of limiting that whole in order to better comprehend its partial functions. Even the functional “invariants” of Kantian philosophy, the intuitions of space and time and the pure concepts of the understanding, only hold firm in relation to that which is taken to be the changeable elements of experience, for this was the principle underlying their critical deduction. What in fact these invariants do is delineate, that is delimit, the functional whole of reality as a particular sub-function of reality, in order to make reality comprehensible. To claim then that some element of experience is absolutely invariant would be to commit the metaphysical fallacy of reasoning from the part to the whole, for only the whole is absolute, and its absolute is the

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68 Cassirer, Substance and Function, 273.

69 This is how the individual systems produced by differing invariants point to the whole; as Moynahan writes, “Truth resides in the development of invariants within a particular system; the reality of one [overarching order] is only given as the never given totality, extending into the future, of these systems” (Moynahan, Ernst Cassirer and the Critical Science of Germany, 142). Compare this to Freudenthal’s criticism of the monadic conception of symbolic formation (cf. footnote 50), who misinterprets the totality expressed by the symbol’s pregnant as something wholly described, rather than something partially delimited.
complete functional relation of all possible elements. This is in fact another expression of
the inherent paradox in Cassirer’s method, for insofar as the activity of critical philosophy
is limited by a particular set of static invariants it can never truly reach the monadic whole
of Leben.70 Instead, as Cassirer points out, the possibility must always remain open that
what is now understood as constant may, in light of some new consideration, be revealed
instead as something variable, and this is as true of the invariants within a system as of any
other static element.

Such a possibility is made actual through the comparison of the different symbolic
forms. The symbolic forms emerge as diverse sub-functions of the analytic universal, and
are distinguished from one another by the particular functional relations that they take as
invariants. For theoretical thinking, and with it critical philosophy, the Kantian intuitions
and pure concepts of understanding express these invariants; however, as Cassirer shows
throughout his writings on the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, these concepts are not as
univocal as Kant believed them to be, but rather develop in characteristically distinct ways
throughout the dynamic history of culture. Even the logic of the analytic universal and the
functional account of the whole are formulations of reality from the perspective of
theoretical thinking, which must approach the whole through its abstraction from
everything definite and limiting. Mythical thinking, on the other hand, finds its own
characteristic approach to the expression of the whole by hypothetically assuming (in the
sense of the world-picture it reveals, not necessarily in the sense of any distinctly conscious
psychological act) that all things which are in any way similar are fundamentally identical,

70 Cf. Section 3 of Chapter 5.
and thus united as a whole.\footnote{Cf. Ernst Cassirer, \textit{The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms Vol. 2: Mythical Thought}, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955; originally published in German in 1925), 63: “[M]yth seems to roll up everything it touches into unity without distinction. The relations it postulates are such that the elements which enter into them not only enter into a reciprocal ideal relationship, but become positively identical with one another, become one and the same \textit{thing}.”} But there is no symbolic form that immediately presents reality, as it is only through its self-expression in the symbols of \textit{Geist} that the monadic whole of \textit{Leben} is in any way made known, and all symbolic formation is a mediation.\footnote{Cf. Section 3 of Chapter 4.} As Cassirer states, “we possess no ‘organ’ for the real; for the necessary \textit{concepts}, which form the real organs for the logical interpretation and mastery of the manifold of sensations, are transformed into mysterious realities behind the phenomena.”\footnote{Cassirer, \textit{Substance and Function}, 127.} Whichever approach we take to reality, we are always limited to the functional hypotheses of reality that we assume in order to make that reality phenomenal, and the best we can do to overcome this limitation is to consider the divergent totality of systems that result from each of these world-pictures. This is the approach to reality presented within \textit{The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms}.

The core of this philosophy is the symbol itself, which as we have seen is not a “copy” of reality but instead is its manifestation within a particular functional system of relations – that is, within a symbolic form. This new concept of the symbol reveals Cassirer’s philosophical indebtedness to Goethe, who, instead of seeing the whole as a mere totality of parts, understood each part as an organic “symbol” of the whole, in the same manner as Leibniz. In Goethe’s theory each particular organic symbol is seen to be a microcosm of the whole, and thus every symbol becomes a potential “organ” for the
interpretation of reality: “every new object, truly perceived, creates a new organ in [the perceiver].”74 Thus, as Cassirer describes, the whole does not gradually emerge through its systematic reconstruction from all the particulars, but rather is present all at once in the organic monad of the symbol: “The whole is no longer grasped in the gradual process of the particular, but it appears and pulls itself together at the same moment in a point, in a concrete symbol.”75 Inasmuch as we can never immediately encompass the whole, the symbol becomes the privileged means for understanding reality through its particular manifestations, each of which is a monadic mirror of the universe. The whole is not the symbol, but every symbol points back to the whole in its own characteristic dimension.

For this reason, the static Kantian definition of “nature” as the whole of reality insofar as it is determined by universal laws, as *natura naturata*, is critiqued by Goethe, whose organic conception of the world resists this as a reduction of the whole to one particular world-picture. The dynamic conception of nature is precisely the reverse: as the monadic whole, nature is the *source* of our laws, it is *natura naturans*, it is the unceasing activity of life in every dimension.76 These competing conceptions of nature as the static structure in which it appears to us and the dynamic process through which that appearance is made possible express the fundamental dialectic of *Geist* and *Leben* as precisely as we have seen.77 Cassirer echoes this dialectic in his own distinction between *forma formata*


77 Moynahan makes this connection explicit: “Nature is not to be taken as a given thing . . . but as a productive developmental whole, a ‘naturing nature,’ of which humanity is a part, and which is continually
and forma formans, the formed symbol and the unifying principle of formation, whose
dialectical development reflects “the swing of the pendulum of intellectual life.”78 Through
their differing concepts of nature as a finished whole and an unfinished principle of
wholeness, Kant and Goethe’s understanding of nature demonstrates this same intellectual
oscillation, whose mediation is found in the very activity of philosophical reason – the
swing of the pendulum itself.79

If reality represents Goethe’s Urphänomen of the Absolute monad, the symbol
represents the Urphänomen of the work; the Urphänomen of activity is the mediating term
between them, for it is the actualization of the whole within the particular. Geist no less
than Leben involves the constant expression of these Urphänomene, but in Geist these are
expressed within the particular province of reason. Therefore, just as Leben as a whole is
both constantly present but never attainable, reason too is not an intellectual possession,
but a process: “it is not so much an actual, as it is a constant and ever actualizing, not a
given but a task. . . . [W]e can never grasp the true nature of reason in bare existence, in
the finished and extant. Instead, we must seek it in the continual self-renewing work of

producing new forms, new experiences and new knowledge. The emphasis is on the dialectic, or better
dialogic, process through which, as Cassirer puts it, “the structure [Gebilde] of reality dissolves into process;
but the process strives always towards the structure” (Moynahan, Ernst Cassirer and the Critical Science of
Germany, 172–73, quoting and translating Cassirer, Freiheit und Form, 257).

78 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 4, 18–19; cf. also Section 4 of Chapter 4.

79 Even this apparent opposition between Kant and Goethe is only partial, for just as critical as
Goethe was of Kant’s static conception of nature in the Critique of Pure Reason, he found the basis for his
own response in the Critique of Judgment (Cassirer, “Goethe and the Kantian Philosophy,” 64–65). Like
Cassirer himself, what Goethe takes from the latter critique is the fundamental importance of relation as
expressed in the concept of the analytic universal; quoting Goethe, “There are relations everywhere, and
relations are life” (ibid, 68).
Neither reason nor even *Geist* is a substantive thing, as it is in Hegel’s philosophy, for neither can be reduced to some stable metaphysical being. Reason, instead, is the activity of *Geist*: it is the actualization of the symbol, it is symbolic formation as such.

Only through its connection to the activity of reason does *Geist* demonstrate its metaphysical reality, because this reality consists in its organic participation in the functional whole of *Leben*, which is activity as such. But *Geist*’s special function within this whole is to make *Leben* visible to itself: “In life alone we do not have . . . ‘being for itself.’ We find this only in the form that life gives to itself.” The very discussion of this function is ample proof of the function’s reality, because this discussion, and equally every other expression of ideas, is the activity of symbolic formation. Insofar as *Geist* is an organic part of the whole of *Leben*, every relation of the whole is reflected within it, and thus every relation is potentially conceivable. The constraints that limit our symbolic representation of the whole are not metaphysical, but result from *Geist* being for-itself; the only metaphysical constraint upon our activity is the limit of the whole as such. This form that life gives to itself “does not disclose itself to us either in mere vegetative-biological existence or in biological development, but only in free activity, that is, in the creation of symbolic forms. . . . Hence it is in these that ‘life’ first attains to ‘form’ (to *eidos*) – in

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81 Ibid; cf. also Section 2 of Chapter 3.

82 Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 4, 228.

83 The reasoning here is precisely analogous to the conceptual necessity of the *cogito* (cf. Section 1 of Chapter 3), which now can be seen to be only one aspect of the broader concept of symbolic formation.
which it reconciles itself with ‘form’.

It is then to the concept of freedom that we must now turn to understand the metaphysical relation of *Geist* and *Leben* as it is reflected in *Geist’s* own becoming.

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84 Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 4, 228.
CHAPTER 7

THE SYSTEMATIC NECESSITY OF FREEDOM IN CASSIRER’S PHILOSOPHY

1. The Prominence of Nicolaus Cusanus in Cassirer’s Works

Cassirer dedicates his monograph on *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* to his University of Hamburg colleague Aby Warburg on June 13th 1926, in commemoration of the art historian’s 60th anniversary. The volume’s dedication speaks both to Cassirer’s feelings of “deep friendship and devotion” for Warburg, as well as his indebtedness to the Warburg Library for the Science of Culture, whose unique organization embodied “the idea of the methodological unity of all fields and all currents of intellectual history [Geistesgeschichte].”1 The significance of the Warburg Library to the development of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is described by Cassirer in the preface to the second volume, where he notes that exposure to the library “gave me fresh encouragement to continue along the road on which I had started, for it suggested that the systematic task undertaken by my book is intimately related to tendencies and demands which are the outgrowth of concrete work in the cultural sciences themselves and of an endeavor to deepen and reinforce their historical foundations.”2 In this way the Warburg Library

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provided Cassirer with a physical instantiation of the functionally interrelated model of culture that his own philosophy was seeking to explain and explore. Furthermore, in the academic community that formed around Warburg and his library Cassirer was able to further develop his ideas through discussion with like-minded colleagues from many different fields.

It is significant that this particular text was published in 1927, two years after the publication of the second volume and a year before publishing the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. In its historical topic and approach this text superficially appears to be a departure from the systematic concerns of Cassirer’s larger project. The title announces the text’s focus on the contributions of Renaissance thinkers to the progressively more interrelated concepts of self and world, and, in keeping with the Warburg circle’s broad cultural focus, Cassirer draws from the writings of artists and early scientists in this text as often as he does from theologians and natural philosophers. And yet for Cassirer the history of Renaissance thought (as also the history of thought in general) is not to be understood as either a disconnected amalgam of independent intellectual advances nor as a single stream of concerted progress. Rather, what gives to the Renaissance its historical unity is its intellectual-spiritual unity (“geistige Gestalt”); the philosophy of the Renaissance “represents the whole, giving it a conceptual-symbolic form of expression.”

Here then we see that in working out the intellectual history of the Renaissance, Cassirer is already approaching conceptual-theoretical thought in the same

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4 Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos*, 6. Domandi notes that throughout Cassirer’s text he translates “geistig” as “intellectual” rather than “spiritual” (ibid, 3); clarifications from the original German have been provided for this and future references to Domandi’s translation.
terms as in the next volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Like a musical intermezzo, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* is exploring the underlying conceptual changes of Renaissance thought that will prepare the way both historically and conceptually for the concerns of the third volume, in much the same way as *Language and Myth* provides an ethnological and genealogical bridge between the first two volumes.

At the formative center of Cassirer’s discussion of this intellectual movement is Nicolaus Cusanus. Cassirer champions Cusanus as a foundational thinker whose reconceptualization of Neoplatonic Scholasticism can be traced as a red thread throughout the complex weave of Renaissance thought. What makes Cassirer’s discussion of this development so relevant to his systematic concerns is that in Cusanus he finds a thinker whose core ideas deeply reflect his own concerns, in spite of the great difference in philosophical and cultural milieu between these 15th and 20th century scholars. Cusanus, in the unity of his approach to every problem, establishes at the same time a conceptual unity between all subject matters, which Cassirer sees as a transformative principle that forms the heart of Renaissance thought: “Any study that seeks to view the philosophy of the Renaissance as a *systematic* unity must take as its point of departure the doctrines of Nicholas Cusanus. . . . Cusanus is the only thinker of the period to look at all of the fundamental problems of his time from the point of view of one principle through which

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5 This is not the only or even the first place that Cassirer discusses Cusanus, and in fact he begins the first volume of his *Erkenntnisproblem* with a 50-page chapter devoted to this figure; see Ernst Cassirer, “Nikolaus Cusanus,” in Vol. 1 of *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1906), 21–72. This demonstrates that Cassirer’s conception of Cusanus as a figure standing at the beginning of modern thought was already formulated early in his career, even though references to Cusanus in works other than the *Erkenntnisproblem* and *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* are comparatively rare.
he masters them all.”\textsuperscript{6} This universalizing character of Cusanus’ thought links him not just to Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel, but also through them to Cassirer himself. While he was still tied in many ways to the Neoplatonic Scholasticism of his day, Cassirer describes how Cusanus breaks free from the core of this tradition to found a new relation between self and world, between \textit{Geist} and \textit{Leben}, which is also found at the heart of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.

It is always a potential trap for the historian to read into history their own ideas, and for the philosopher to find their own philosophy in another’s words. Throughout his works, however, Cassirer engages with thinkers whose positions are distinct from his own, and he takes great care in presenting those views as fairly and accurately as possible, no matter whether they are quite close or quite far from his own views. Much of his writing takes the form of a series of long discussions of different figures, considering and at least partially rejecting the ideas of each in turn, so as to rest at last on a few conceptions that modestly advance his own thesis. When Cassirer disagrees with the figure he is discussing, he relies on a number of subtle rhetorical devices to indicate this disagreement, such as describing the implications of that person’s theory using the subjunctive tense, or employing a narrative reversal after an extensive analysis to introduce the shortcomings of those ideas. Within his writing subtleties such as these are often the only immediate “tells” of how his perspective differs from the one he is describing.

It is then all the more significant that throughout his extensive discussion of Nicolaus Cusanus in this text these subtle signs of disagreement are almost entirely absent; where they do come about is mostly when Cassirer is addressing Cusanus’ affiliation with

\textsuperscript{6} Cassirer, \textit{The Individual and the Cosmos}, 7.
Scholasticism, and noncoincidentally it is in Cusanus’ particular break with Scholasticism that Cassirer locates Cusanus’ spiritual and intellectual contribution. Cusanus is depicted as a paragon of intellectual advancement whose only equals in Cassirer’s favor may be Leibniz, Goethe, and Kant. And just like Kant, Cusanus’ principal contribution to philosophy is seen by Cassirer as a fundamental revolution in thought, a pre-Copernican revolution, which prepares the intellectual groundwork for not only Copernican science, Leibnizian monadology, and Kantian metaphysics, but also Cassirer’s own philosophy of symbolic forms. However, the evidence of Cusanus’ influence on Cassirer is not found in any explicit attribution that Cassirer makes, but rather in the great many similarities among his descriptions of Cusanus’ philosophy and legacy in Renaissance thought and his own conceptions in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. It is true that Cassirer’s interpretation of Cusanus and later Renaissance figures reflects his own concerns, but this only further demonstrates the significance of Cassirer’s reading of these figures.

In this context, the question of whether Cassirer’s analysis of Cusanus and the philosophy of the Renaissance is correct and accurate becomes moot. In the terms of his own systematic conceptions, what matters here is that Cassirer’s own philosophical ideas

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8 Cf. John Herman Randall, Jr., “Cassirer’s Theory of History as Illustrated in his Treatment of Renaissance Thought,” in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston, IL: Library of Living Philosophers, 1949), who argues that Cassirer’s earlier treatment of the Renaissance in the *Erkenntnisproblem* is distinctly neo-Kantian in its interpretation: “The reader gets at times the impression that the Renaissance was populated largely with Vorkantianer. It is not that Cassirer actually distorts the thought of the men he is dealing with. . . . It is rather that the problems he singles out for analysis are those which interest the Kantian” (ibid, 710). However, Randall also observes that Cassirer’s interpretation of these same figures in *The Individual and the Cosmos* demonstrates Cassirer’s own transition away from strict neo-Kantianism to the broader humanism of his later works (ibid, 711–715).
are substantially reflected within his discussion of Cusanus and Cusanus’ influence.9 But whereas the focus of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is on the current picture of those forms as they have developed up to Cassirer’s own day, the deep problems of the development of *Geist* out of *Leben* is, as we have seen, never fully resolved in Cassirer’s works, and indeed forms the key question of “On the Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms.” For this reason, Cassirer’s explicit focus on the development of thought in *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* is an invaluable aid in working out his own conception of the cultural development of the symbolic forms. And, of all the works produced by Cassirer following the publication of the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, it is in this discussion of Nicolaus Cusanus and Renaissance philosophy that we find the clearest and fullest evidence of the conception of freedom at work in Cassirer’s own philosophy.10

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9 For these reasons, the objections against Cassirer’s interpretation of Cusanus raised by Yossef Schwarz (for instance) do not require further comment; see Yossef Schwarz, “Ernst Cassirer on Nicholas of Cusa: Between Conjectural Knowledge and Religious Pluralism,” in *The Symbolic Construction of Reality: The Legacy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Jeffrey A. Barash (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Even if we grant, with Schwarz, that Cassirer’s need to “unmoor” Cusanus from the previous intellectual tradition was based on Cassirer’s “limited and stereotypical view of medieval thought” (ibid, 25) and only succeeds by leaving contradictory claims made by Cusanus out of consideration (ibid, 28), Schwarz himself observes that Cassirer’s “interpretative” method is precisely the means by which Cassirer draws out his own view of the “conscious unity” expressed by a philosopher or movement, and thus represents Cassirer’s own philosophical concerns:

> If one considers the variety of opinions surrounding thirteenth-century debate on the intellect, it is easy to see what seemed to Cassirer so revolutionary in those ideas of Nicholas of Cusa. . . . It is against this scholastic background that Cusa develops a univocal and at the same time dynamic notion of science. Taken in its generality, this interpretative move is typical of Cassirer, who always seeks to locate the conscious unity underlying the range of works and ideas of any particular thinker or, indeed, of entire philosophical traditions. (ibid, 27)

Ultimately, the question of whether Cassirer’s interpretation of Cusanus is correct is distinct from the current question, which is how Cassirer understands the philosophy of Cusanus in relation to his own philosophy.

10 In this connection, mention must be made of another work of Cassirer’s early career, *Freiheit und Form: Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1916). This political text, the last major philosophical work to be completed by Cassirer before his conception of the philosophy of symbolic forms, is an important source for understanding the development of his later philosophical system and in
2. Cusanus and the Dialectical Necessity of Freedom

Cassirer sees in Nicolaus Cusanus a transitional figure, firmly rooted in the Neoplatonic tradition of Scholastic philosophy but also demonstrating a “completely new total intellectual orientation [eine völlig neue geistige Gesamtorientierung]” to not just the problems but also the basic worldview of Scholasticism.\footnote{Cassirer, The Individual and the Cosmos, 10 [Ger. 11].} The basic speculative idea of this new orientation arises directly as a response to the Neoplatonic conception of a graduated cosmos that organizes both the sensible and intelligible worlds into one great ladder of being, with the absolute form of God as the source from which everything lesser in being emanates leading all the way down to the wholly finite and absolutely formless. In turn, this ladder to the intelligible world and to God was thought to be traversable in a stepwise reversal of this emanation through the power of intelligence. But for Cusanus this reversal is seen to be impossible, because whatever is absolute is infinitely removed from a merely finite intelligence: “By its essence and definition, the absolute object lies beyond every possibility of comparison and measurement and therefore beyond the possibility of knowledge.”\footnote{Ibid, 11.}

But far from merely retreating from this impossibility, Cusanus sees our relation to an absolute essence as necessary not just for knowledge of the intelligible world but for...
Empirical knowledge as well: “[N]o empirical knowledge is possible that is not related to an ideal being and to an ideal being—thus . . . Thus, everything conditioned and finite aims at the unconditioned, without ever being able to attain it.”\textsuperscript{13} Empirical knowledge requires an ideal, absolute truth, which serves as an impossible-to-reach archetype of necessary determinateness that in turn gives to empirical knowledge its limitless determinability, precisely in that it cannot attain what Cusanus calls the “absolute Maximum” of the infinite archetype but is always capable of being more or less similar to that archetype.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, “The Maximum is not a quantitative, but a purely qualitative concept [kein Großenbegriff, sondern ein rein qualitativer Begriff],”\textsuperscript{15} and there is no possible quantitative comparison between things that are qualitatively different. The absolute Maximum remains qualitatively different from anything we experience, and thus is itself something that transcends the very possibility of experience. But it is also, as archetype, that which conditions our experience: “It is the absolute foundation of being as well as the absolute foundation of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{16} Cusanus challenges the dogmatic Neoplatonic assertion that we can know the absolute by instead demonstrating that the absolute is the epistemological precondition of our experience, and that for this reason it is in fact an epistemological impossibility for us to know the absolute. The awareness of this, the “ignorant knowledge” [“nichtwissenden Wissens”] of the docta ignorantia, is for Cusanus the height of our knowledge, in much the same way as Plato articulates our ignorance of

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 22.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 21–22.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 20 [Ger. 23].
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 20.
As Cassirer asserts, “This position towards the problem of knowledge [Erkenntnisproblem] makes of Cusanus the first modern thinker.”

In this regard we can better understand why Cassirer places Cusanus at the beginning of both his Erkenntnisproblem and his later trilogy of historical philosophy. In Cassirer’s description of Cusanus’ intellectual-spiritual reorientation we see what already appears to be a Cartesian questioning of the conditions of knowledge, and even an essentially Kantian answer: “The one truth, ungraspable in its absolute being, can present itself to us only in the realm of otherness; on the other hand, there is no otherness for us that does not in some way point to the unity and participate in it. . . . In Kantian language, it shows that our knowledge, to be sure, is bounded by insurmountable limits; but that within the domain assigned to knowledge there are no limits placed upon it.”

In the same manner as the Kantian phenomenon of experience must always be understood as conditioned by some ungraspable noumenal object, which is in turn capable of any number of empirical representations, so too does the Cusanian absolute allow for any number of empirical representations without ever reaching the absolute itself. A similar conception of limitless determinability is found in Cassirer’s own philosophy, for here too there is no “absolute reality” of Leben that we can immediately access and therein ground our

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17 Ibid, 23 [Ger. 26]; cf. also ibid, n. 21.

18 Ibid, 10 [Ger. 11].


20 Cassirer, The Individual and the Cosmos, 23.
symbolic formations, but nonetheless the transcendental “beyond” of Leben conditions and constrains its own formation as Geist.

However, the fundamental separation of our empirical knowledge from the absolute truth does not constitute an end of inquiry for Cusanus, for the very reason that the empirical is conditioned by, or participates in, the truth of the absolute: “separation [chorismos] and participation [methexis] . . . can only be thought of through and in relation to each other [durch die andere und mit Bezug auf die andere].”21 The related antitheses of the empirical and the absolute, the human and the divine, and the limited and the limitless are all composed of elements that are irreducible one to the other, yet each term “grasp[s] itself in its complete ‘otherness’. And precisely this otherness implies a relation to this negative pole.”22 Through this negative relation, already expressed as the ignorant knowledge of the absolute other, Cusanus sees a new principle by which what had been strictly divided may yet be bound together. This is the basic speculative idea that Cassirer identifies as the heart of Cusanus’ entire intellectual orientation: “the essence of the idea is that it sets up antitheses only to reconcile them, to resolve and master them through the principle of the coincidentia oppositorum.”23 That which stands opposed to knowledge can still be affirmed through the mediation (Vermittlung) of its opposition, which brings us into the realm of dialectical thinking.

It is in and through the dialectic formed by these antitheses that Cusanus believes that we can reconcile what we know with the conditions of our knowledge. But such a

21 Ibid, 22 [Ger. 26].
22 Ibid, 39.
23 Ibid, 38.
reconciliation, in its assertion of an underlying unity between one’s thinking and its unknowable antithesis, is more than a mere recognition and assimilation of ready-made ideas; it is instead the autonomous creation of a conceptual unity. Furthermore, the creation of such a unity acts as an inverse function to the original creative act of the Neoplatonic God: “Just as all essential differences come from God, so all conceptual differences emerge from the human intellect [menschliche Intellekt]. And thus it is the primary source of that harmony which is always the resolution of *opposites*.”

Just as God is understood by Cusanus as the creative source which binds together all essential differences in the harmony of their mutual relations to this origin and thence to each other, man becomes the creative source through which this underlying harmony of all things is clarified and asserted as knowledge. The resolution of opposites, this *coincidentia oppositorum*, therefore fundamentally seeks to reestablish in knowledge the essential harmony of all things, which is the truth of the absolute.

This creative function of the human mind is therefore the reconciliation made possible by the originary creation of the antitheses of being. And thus we see that man’s genuine knowledge and insight is not directly of what is absolutely beyond him, but is rather directed towards the relation between himself and that which he is not, through which the necessity of that relation negatively reveals itself:

Genuine and true knowledge is not merely directed towards a simple reproduction [Abbilden] of reality; rather, it always represents a specific direction of intellectual activity [geistigen Tuns]. The necessity we recognize in science, and especially in mathematics, is due to this free activity. The man attains genuine insight not when it reproduces external

24 Ibid, 42 [Ger. 49].
existence [äußeres Dasein], but only when it ‘explicates’ itself and its own nature [sein eigenes Wesen].

Thus, genuine knowledge not only is revealed through but requires a subjective turn – the turn to the idea – for it is only in and through this relation of the thinking subject to the absolute other that the unity of what is distinct in essence can become manifest in the form of self-knowledge. Showing that the pure Kantian intuitions of time and space and the categories of logic all grow out of the mind’s own self-directed activity, Cassirer exemplifies how this free, creative power of mind “is the necessary prerequisite to the possibility of tracing the empirical-mutable [des empirisch Veränderlichen] back to strictly defined laws [fest bestimmte Gesetze].” Everything necessary – science as such – finds its original justification in the subject’s freely-directed discovery of its own conditions of knowledge, as the reconciliation of finite, variable experience with the infinite and unchanging absolute.

Consequently, Cusanus reasons that the unknowable absolute is best approached through an expansive inquiry of the empirical in all its diversity, for only through such an empirical investigation will the conditions of the absolute reveal themselves: “[W]e can see the being [Sein] that is prior to any limitation [Einschränkung] . . . only through the limitation itself. The ideal towards which our knowledge must strive, then, does not lie in denying and rejecting particularity, but in allowing it to unfold in all its richness.” Here we see a striking similarity to Cassirer’s own approach in the Philosophy of Symbolic

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25 Ibid, 41 [Ger. 48].
26 Cf. Section 3 of Chapter 4.
27 Cassirer, The Individual and the Cosmos, 41 [Ger. 48].
28 Ibid, 36–37 [Ger. 43].
Forms, where likewise the conditions of Geist are only uncovered in Geist’s particular and diverse formations of Leben, and thus the more fully Geist is investigated, the more clearly the underlying unities of symbolic formation are revealed. In neither Cusanus nor Cassirer is this unity to be found as the mere totality of human representations, however. Rather, the unity in question is equally active in every single representation, but only as the negative relation of limitation – that is, as form itself. Thus for both thinkers the investigation of the sense-world is equally the investigation of the form-giving power of the self:

[I]n exercising its own creative power, the mind [der Geist] does not remain within itself but must have recourse to sensible ‘matter’, which it forms and transforms [bildet und umgestaltet]. But this does not indicate a retreat [Abfall] from the purely intellectual [intellektuellen] nature and essence of the mind [Geist]. For here, again, the way up and the way down are one and the same; the intellect [Der Intellekt] descends to the sensible only to raise the sense-world up to itself. Its action upon a world made of apparently opposite stuff [eine scheinbar entgegengesetzte stoffliche Welt] is the condition for its recognizing and realizing its own form, and for translating [überführt] this form from potential to actual being.29

Such a transformation is not, however, a mere reproduction of some sensible “stuff” in an intellectual medium; for Cusanus, and equally for Cassirer, the creation of a conceptual unity is its own autonomous act by which the organization of the sense-world, and even the apprehension of it as a world, is first achieved. We only have form through the symbol in which that form is expressed, and thus neither form nor symbol can be separated from the act of formation; however for this same reason the act is not determined in advance by any essential form or content of formation, but is a free and autonomous creation of Geist.

29 Ibid, 57–58 [Ger. 68].
Neither is man “essentially” free, as if we could treat freedom as a predicate of a particular kind of being, for it is only in his activity, in his “history”, that man can “prove himself to be truly creative and free.” Yet it is in the creative activity of his freedom that man’s unity with God, his role as microcosm, is revealed: “only through freedom can man become God-like.” Though in every other dimension man and God are seen as absolutely divided, their free, creative activity serves as the logical term of their relation, their tertium comparationis:

God and man, then, are comparable neither in their being nor in their works. For whereas God’s creation produces the things themselves, the human mind [Geist] has to do only with their signs and symbols. . . . Nevertheless, there is a connection between them, and it consists in the manner in which they produce. Here alone lies the real tertium comparationis. The relationship cannot at all be understood through any comparison taken from the world of finished things, for it is a dynamic, not a static relationship. We cannot require or seek an essential similarity of substance but rather a correspondence in act, in operation.

In reaction to the absolute separation of God from man necessitated by the Neoplatonic conception of an ordered cosmos, Cusanus finds the relative bridge between the two in their creative production. In keeping with Cassirer’s own metaphysics, the universal connection of all things is nothing synthetic and substantive, but rather an analytic and dynamic principle by which all things are connected by their interrelated activity. And it is in his free activity of creation, in his active relation to all things, that man likewise establishes his relationship to God the Absolute.

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30 Ibid, 43.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid, 68 [Ger. 80].
However, the distinction between the works of God and man remains, for whereas God establishes the essence of things, which is to say reality itself, it is left to man to establish the value of things, in the broad sense of their existence for us:33 “there is . . . a sphere in which [man] functions as a free creator and in which he reigns autonomously. This is the sphere of value. Without human nature there would be no such thing as value, i.e., there would be no principle for evaluating things according to their greater or lesser perfection.”34 Value is the principle of order found in every object of knowledge, and without it the order necessary for something to be an “object” does not exist. But the world itself contains no determinate value, no fixed point of reference for objectification. It is only in man’s creation of value, in which the intellect freely imposes its own formal unities, that the world first appears, and with it the value-creating subject. Man’s freedom is, we may say, the freedom of formation, for every object reflects a rule of formation – a symbolic form.

3. Conclusion

Tying the notion of freedom revealed in Cusanus’ philosophy back to Cassirer’s metaphysics, we can now clearly see that the role of God in Cusanus’ philosophy systematically corresponds to that of Leben in Cassirer. As the absolute source of reality, both conceptions stand in the same relation to Geist as the complex and free activity of symbolic formation. Furthermore we can now understand why for Cassirer the freedom of

33 Cf. Section 2 of Chapter 2.

34 Cassirer, The Individual and the Cosmos, 44.
Geist is not merely a metaphysical hypothesis, but is necessitated by the very act of symbolic formation that constitutes it, for it is only the act of formation that makes necessity, which is the imposition of a value, possible:

> [A]ll our knowledge of nature – insofar as it is knowledge – that is, an ideal goal and an ideal task – rests ultimately on an act of freedom, on a standpoint that reason appoints itself. Yet true freedom is not the opposite of obligation, but is its beginning and source. The first act: the choice of certain empirical elements which we take as correspondences to certain constructive forms, is free – but in the second and all subsequent acts we are bondsmen, unless thought, by a new act, suspends the whole fabric of inferences and begins with a new assumption.\(^\text{35}\)

Insofar as knowledge is a particular formation of “nature”, that is Leben, it finds its ultimate source in the activity of the monadic whole, but it is not in the whole that any particular principle of necessity is to be found. Just as in Cusanus’ conception of God as the Absolute, the whole that is Leben can only be regarded as free, for nothing stands above it, whereas everything under it must conform to it. But when Leben is transformed by the double movement of separation and participation into an object of knowledge, this formative activity is not merely a reflection of Leben but rather constitutes its own novel act and is therefore free of any prior necessity. Thus, the only “necessity” that comes to bear on symbolic formation is that which Geist freely assumes – the world-picture that concretizes around each novel formation, and which together, in their relative stability in the history of anthropogeny, come to be known as symbolic forms.

In this sense we see that the creations of Geist are different from all other creations of Leben, for in Geist the relations expressed are the representations of other relations: they

are a second-order activity in which the relations of Leben are themselves put into a new relation according to the principle of order of the particular symbolic form. But this formulation expresses man’s freedom in another sense, for if man, as monad, is his activity, then the freedom of symbolic formation from any prior necessity in Leben is likewise the freedom of man himself:

Creation in the ordinary sense can only be understood as the conferring upon the created of both a definite, prescribed sphere of willing and of acting. But man breaks through every such barrier. His activity is not dictated to him by his reality; rather, man’s activity contains ever new possibilities which, by their very nature, go beyond any finite circle. . . . For man alone constitutes an exception to the rule that governs the rest of creation; man is the only exception to its rigid ‘type’. 36

In this paraphrase of Pico della Mirandola’s philosophy, Cassirer has articulated the role of freedom in a philosophy of man: through symbolic formation, man intellectually escapes from the prescribed sphere of reality and accomplishes that turnabout which makes his very reality into an object of contemplation.

Reality thus ceases to be regarded as something purely external to man, but instead becomes the basis of his own metaphysical self-discovery. In its dynamic whole, reality is relation, and this is equally true of man’s particular share in reality. But relation is activity, and activity is not yet knowledge. Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms seeks the truth of the whole, which is reality itself, but the critical impossibility of this task demands a phenomenological approach to overcome it and demonstrate how reality becomes actualized as existence, how it becomes known. As we have seen, however, this account is equally impossible if the goal is to uncover one true functional model of the whole, for the

36 Cassirer, The Individual and the Cosmos, 85.
very function of formation is only possible by applying a principle of order to that which
comes before any order, the *natura naturans* of the pure *Urphänomen* of the monad.

But through this foundering of every attempt to reach a static truth of the whole,
the dynamic truth is negatively revealed; as in Kierkegaard’s subjective mode of reflection,
the truth of the absolute is precisely found in our dynamic relation to it. And just as reality
is revealed as *natura naturans*, so too in the double determination of self and other we are
simultaneously revealed as *forma formans*. As a microcosmic reflection of the whole, we
are led to the sense of our own unconditioned freedom of formative possibility that
necessarily underlies every interpretation of reality as existence. The pregnance of the
symbol is likewise the acknowledgment of our freedom; it is the awareness that underlying
every act of symbolic formation is an undetermined choice of interpretation. Every
interpretation is a perspective on reality, meaning that existence itself, and meaning itself,
are perspectival. The world-picture in which reality is interpreted is never reality itself, nor
is the resulting interpretation. But the act of interpreting is an act of relating, it is the self
as *forma formans* that in every moment becomes actualized as *forma formata*.

Cassirer’s philosophy of man is based in this inescapable dialectic, by which the
freedom of our symbolic activity is ever juxtaposed against the rule-bound necessity of its
resulting symbols. The very attempt to know ourselves throws us into this dialectic for the
simple reason that whatever we know is already a symbolic transformation of reality. But,
in tracing out Cassirer’s metaphysical conceptions, we see how a negative relation to
reality, what Cusanus calls ignorant knowledge, is possible. At first blush this approach to
reality would seem to be the precise opposite of that in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*
with its wealth of anthropogenic research. What has emerged however is that, insofar as
every symbolic formation carries within it the principle of its formative activity, the search for reality can hardly be carried out any other way than through this whole history. For Geist, as the whole of this activity, only finds itself within the resulting symbol: it “possesses and grasps itself in the imprint of form as the infinite possibility of formation, as the will to form and the power to form;” and so far is Leben from limiting Geist that it rather “proves to be a witness to its freedom and self-formation.”37 It is thus in and through the dialectic of Geist and Leben that man’s reality is revealed as forma formans, as the free activity of symbolic formation.

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