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Ernst Cassirer in Sweden

John Michael Krois

Zusammenfassung

Ernst Cassirer lehrt von 1935 bis 1941 nicht nur an der Universität in Göteborg, sondern verfasst in diesen Jahren auch zahlreiche Texte. Von ihnen ist bisher jedoch nur ein geringer Teil publiziert worden, obwohl sie eine vollkommen neue Dimension im Denken Cassirers offenbaren. So beschäftigt er sich intensiv mit den Ideen der Uppsala-Schule um Axel Hägerström und des Wiener Kreises, die eine traditionelle metaphysische Philosophie ablehnen, und entwickelt so seine eigene Phänomenologie. Er versucht, eine neue, weniger rigide Form des Denkens zu finden, die den Pathos der philosophischen Romantik und die Begrenztheit des Positivismus vermeidet. Cassirers Texte aus seiner Zeit in Schweden setzen sich mit allen Themen auseinander, mit denen er sich jemals beschäftigt hat, so dass diese in Bezug auf sein philosophisches Schaffen zu seinen wichtigsten überhaupt gezählt werden können.

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Introduction

Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) was among the most prominent of the many scholars¹ who sought a haven in Sweden in the 1930s and 40s from the National Socialists in Germany. The year before he arrived at Gothenburg to teach he was awarded an honorary doctorate of law from the University of Glasgow, and not long before he left Germany, Hamburg University had recognized his achievements by appointing him rector for the academic year 1929/30. Cassirer came to Gothenburg in September 1935, and during his six-year stay at the Högskola he engaged in a wide variety of research, lecturing, and teaching, as well as publishing 23 texts, including four of book length. The true nature and extent of Cassirer's work during his years in Sweden remained unknown however for many decades because most of his writing from this time was not published. Since the edition of his *Nachlass*² began to appear in the mid-1990s a whole new dimension of Cassirer's thought has begun to emerge from his work in Sweden.

Since the 1920s Cassirer was internationally well-known as a philosopher for his three-volume *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923/29) and for his historical studies of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. His publications in Sweden included one of his chief writings on the theory of science – his interpretation of the philosophical implications of quantum theory³ and his book on study methods in the cultural sciences⁴. Moreover, he published articles in the Swedish journals *Lychnos*, *Theoria*, and *Göteborgs Kungl. Vetenskaps- och Vitterhets-Samhälles Handlingar*, including position papers such as *Humanistische und Naturalistische Begründungen der Kulturphilosophie* in which he took a stand on

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fundamental questions such as the possibility of creating a predictive philosophy of history akin to science (which Cassirer denied). In these texts Cassirer displayed what reviewers thought was a noteworthy independence of mind. For example, in his review of the Determinism book, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker noted that Cassirer seemed no longer to uphold Kantianism because he abandoned the causal principle that was appropriate for classical mechanics in which Kant believed.⁵ The very question of method in the cultural sciences, which he explicated in *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften*, was a new topic for Cassirer. Cassirer's publications from the 1930s and early 1940s offered only hints of what actually was going on in Cassirer's philosophizing since he came to Sweden. Before entering into these developments, it will help to consider Cassirer's circumstances at the time.

Cassirer comes to Sweden

When Hindenburg appointed Hitler chancellor of Germany on the 30th of January 1933, Cassirer realized with unusual foresight what this meant. He took a leave of absence from his post at the University of Hamburg and when the term ended, he and his wife left the country on the 12th of March. They never lived in Germany again.⁶ On the 10th of April the Nazis passed the so-called *Reichsgesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums* thereby barring persons of Jewish descent from public office. By then, Cassirer had already begun to seek ways to teach outside Germany. In the summer of 1933, Cassirer was offered a position as Chichele Lecturer at All Soul's College in Oxford, and he began teaching there that October. An invitation to teach courses that autumn at the University of Uppsala came too late, but Cassirer was able to go to Uppsala the following year, where he lectured from the 15th of September to the 15th of October before returning to Oxford. Cassirer's most important contact in Sweden was Malte Jacobsson, who had studied philosophy at Berlin with Cassirer. Jacobsson had been in touch with Cassirer since 1927,⁷ seeking to have him come to Sweden to give a series of lectures. In 1934 Jacobsson left his position as a professor of philosophy in Gothenburg in order to become governor (Landshövding) of Gothenburg and Bohus, a post he held from 1934 to 1950. By a special arrangement, Cassirer was to become his successor as the professor of philosophy at Gothenburg.⁸ There, he took over Jacobsson's duties in September of 1935 and lectured until May of 1941. He soon had a circle of students and other interested persons who regularly attended his lectures and then met at his home at Föreningsgatan 11 for informal discussions.⁹

Cassirer was 60 years old when he arrived in Gothenburg in 1935, and since German was still taught then in Swedish schools as the primary second language, he was able to lecture in his native tongue. He soon learned to speak and write Swedish, however, which he already was able to read. He was interested in his new cultural surroundings, which he investigated in a number of studies on Swedish literature and history, including two studies on Thomas Thorild and a widely discussed study of Queen Christina and her times.¹⁰ Like all of Cassirer's so-called historical writings, the study of Queen Christina also developed philosophical points, in particular the role of stoicism in the 17th conception of ethical heroism.

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Cassirer's writings about Christina and other figures from Swedish history reflected a particular philosophical conception of culture that focused on the importance of "representative" symbolic details rather than on historical "influences". His study of Christina remains one of the best examples of his application of this conception, which permitted Cassirer to show how Christina, Descartes, and Pierre Corneille all represented the same "common cultural task" in the different spheres of politics, philosophy, and drama.

Cassirer taught regularly in Gothenburg until his retirement at the age of 65, and thereafter he continued to give well-attended public lectures at the university. His last public lecture series was about Goethe,¹¹ which ended not long before the Cassirers left Gothenburg by sea in May 1941 to visit the United States for what Cassirer thought would be a two-year guest professorship at Yale. Cassirer had become a Swedish citizen on the 2nd of June 1939 and relinquished both his German citizenship and pension. His correspondence with Malte Jacobsson from this time shows that he was planning to return to Sweden to live there after he finished teaching in the United States. Instead, Cassirer died of a sudden heart attack on the campus of Columbia University in New York on the 13th of April 1945. Cassirer had made a deep impression during his stay in Sweden, and his death was reported upon widely in the Swedish press.

The Swedish Phase of Cassirer's Philosophy

In addition to teaching at Gothenburg, Cassirer was invited to lecture at universities throughout Sweden. He spoke repeatedly at Lund, Stockholm, and at Uppsala. At the time, Uppsala was home of the "Uppsala school" of philosophy, headed by Axel Hägerström,¹² which sought to establish a realistic philosophy in opposition to Idealism. The antagonisms between the Uppsala school and philosophers at Stockholm ran deep, but Cassirer was able to mediate a kind of truce on his visit to Stockholm and Uppsala in 1937, as he wrote to his friend Åke Petzäll (in a letter dated "Göteborg, 27.10.37"), indicating with some pride that members of both groups sat next to one another at his lecture. Things were different two years later, however, when he revisited Uppsala and spoke on the question "What is Subjectivism?", a topic that went to the heart of the Uppsala position. In another letter to Petzäll after that visit, Cassirer described the newspaper reports of the ensuing debate as overly dramatic. In the long and heated discussion that followed his presentation, Cassirer thought that a mutual understanding had finally been reached, when he remarked that "Realität" should not simply be asserted in a naive and dogmatic way. Hedenius objected by replying that the Uppsala school was "consciously-dogmatic" ("bewusst dogmatisch") to which Marc-Wogau added that it was even "consciously naive" ("bewusst naiv"). Cassirer wrote Petzäll with playful irony that he was not sure if this last conception would stand up to a strict conceptual analysis, but that in any case this was then all just too much for Oxenstierna who energetically contradicted both claims, so that the argument started anew. Cassirer concluded by writing that everything ended with a fine lunch, so that in the end Swedish hospitality won out over the sharpest philosophical oppositions.

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Cassirer was fortunate to have Åke Petzäll (1901–1957) as his colleague at Gothenburg, with whom he developed a close friendship. Petzäll was 25 years younger than Cassirer, and he possessed an energetic temperament and open mindedness that Cassirer welcomed. Petzäll was docent in Gothenburg from 1928–1939 and thereafter (1939–1957) professor of practical philosophy in Lund. More important, he was the founder and longtime editor (1935–1957) of the journal *Theoria* in which Swedish philosophers often engaged in published exchanges – an intellectual form that was not common in Germany. Cassirer published eight contributions in *Theoria*, including important systematic clarifications of his fundamental intellectual orientation such as *Inhalt und Umfang des Begriffs*.

Bemerkungen zu Konrad Marc-Wogau,¹³ *Zur Logik des Symbolbegriffs*¹⁴ and *Was ist 'Subjektivismus'?*¹⁵. All these articles were written in reaction to the Uppsala school of philosophy and each publication reflects personal discussions that Cassirer had with Uppsala philosophers. The first was a response to a publication of Konrad Marc-Wogau's in *Theoria*, which was critical of Cassirer's presentation of logic and symbolism. The latter was a version of the controversial lecture that Cassirer gave at Uppsala in 1939.

Petzäll had first written to Cassirer in 1933 even before he ever visited Sweden, sending him a copy of his study of the Vienna Circle of Logical Positivism,¹⁶ which was then in its heyday. Cassirer was himself in Vienna at the time, where his wife's family lived, when he received Petzäll's first letter. In his reply he expressed interest and agreement with Petzäll's study. This was not a matter of coincidence.

The intellectual atmosphere in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries was different then from the climate prevailing in Germany. Scandinavian philosophers were among the earliest to react positively to the Vienna circle's substitution of the analysis of language for the traditional starting points in philosophy such as reflection on "the thinking subject". Åke Petzäll's 1931 study was in fact one of the first comprehensive published treatments of the Vienna Circle. Another was by the Finnish philosopher Eino Kaila (*Der logistische Neupositivismus*, 1930), whose work was also well-known to Cassirer, who acted as one of the reviewers of Kaila's habilitation. Whereas in Germany Neo-Kantianism, Lebensphilosophie, and Phenomenology all were outwardly critical of traditional metaphysical philosophy, they nonetheless sought to take the place of German Idealism. None of these schools of philosophy were as radical in their criticisms of traditional idealistic philosophy as the thinkers of the Vienna Circle of Logical Positivism. For the Positivists, philosophy was an activity – the analysis of language – not a doctrine. For this school, metaphysics did not simply involve errors of thought, it was meaningless, for it used language in ways that could not be true or false. Metaphysical claims about the nature of reality could never be verified by scientific research or methods. Thinkers sympathetic with the Vienna school, such as Hans Reichenbach, had a difficult time finding a position in Germany because of the Positivists' complete rejection of the metaphysical tradition. Cassirer was the only philosopher to sign a petition of Reichenbach's, asking the Prussian government to create a professorship in philosophy of science¹⁷ (otherwise the petition was signed only by scientists, including Einstein and Hilbert), although he disagreed with Reichenbach on many issues. Cassirer was

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critical of many doctrines proposed by the Vienna circle Positivists, as was Petzäll,¹⁸ but he did not oppose their critical spirit. Cassirer had been in personal contact with the major thinkers of the Vienna circle – Carnap, Neurath, Schlick, and others such as Reichenbach – since the 1920s, usually to criticize them on a number of points – their views of what constituted meaningful language, their notions of verification, their views of alterity (knowledge of the Other), and even their conceptions of the tasks of philosophy, particularly the possibility and importance of developing a theory of culture. Nonetheless, Cassirer's admiration for the Positivists' attitudes increased during his years in Sweden, and for the same reason that he engaged gladly with the Uppsala school despite his disagreements with them on specific issues.¹⁹

Many philosophers whom Cassirer had known in Germany, such as the Neo-Kantian Heinrich Rickert, had done nothing to oppose the rise of National Socialism, while others, such as the phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, embraced it. A thinker's intellectual orientation had apparently no influence on readiness to embrace Nazi ideology. One of Nazism's staunchest adherents, Bruno Bauch, had styled himself a Kantian, while another – an example that particularly hurt Cassirer – the Neo-Kantian Albert Görland, who like Cassirer had also studied with Hermann Cohen and had even edited Cohen's writings together with Cassirer, also adopted the Nazi cause.²⁰ The fact that so many of Cassirer's former philosophical colleagues could abandon ethical ideals so readily was one of his greatest disappointments after he left Germany.²¹ Only the Vienna Circle had remained immune to enthusiasm for the Nazi world view. To quote one of the Vienna School's chief proponents, Otto Neurath:

Niemand kann den logischen Empirismus zur Begründung eines totalitären Arguments benutzen. Er bietet nicht ein einziges Schlupfloch für Dogmatismus. Pluralismus ist das Rückgrat meines Denkens. Metaphysische Haltungen führen oft zum Totalitarismus, aber ich kenne keinen einzigen logischen Empiristen, der als solcher zu einer totalitären Auffassung gelangt ist.²²

So too, the critical attitudes of the Uppsala school made it difficult to opt for the fanaticism of *Volksgeist*-thinking. It was their dedication to clearheaded thought and skepticism about metaphysical world views that drew Cassirer to these movements during his years in Sweden.

Cassirer's new program for philosophy

In Cassirer's inaugural lecture at Gothenburg on the 19th of October 1935,²³ which he entitled *The Concept of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem*²⁴, he announced that he was going to embark on a new program of research. He stated that he now regarded philosophy differently than before, asserting that philosophy had a duty to examine social and political reality, to which he had himself given too little attention, and that among other things he would examine the question whether there are trans-cultural ethical claims. Two things caused Cassirer to rethink his philosophy during his years in Sweden – one, obviously was the state of European politics, which had led him to leave Germany, and the other was his exposure to contemporary

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Swedish philosophy, in particular the Uppsala school of Axel Hägerström. The Uppsala school like the Vienna Circle of Logical Positivism radically opposed traditional metaphysical philosophy and drew far-ranging consequences from this. But unlike the Vienna Circle, which gave pride of place to the philosophy of science, the Uppsala school, and Hägerström in particular, focused upon ethics and legal philosophy.

Hägerström and the Vienna Circle both held that only physicalistic descriptions were genuinely cognitive, that "objectivity" was only possible in the discussion of physical objects. This meant that the phenomenological – observable – difference between things and other persons fell by the wayside, even though the phenomenon of expression (such as seeing a smile or a frown) is an undeniable fact. Their strictly physical conception of objectivity led Hägerström and his followers to conceive of ethics and normative topics as matters of momentary feeling. Hägerström's position became known as *value nihilism*, yet Hägerström did not deny the social importance of values, only the kind of metaphysical underpinnings that philosophers usually offered for them, such as a "general will".²⁵ Hägerström's writings on the history of law, particularly Roman law, were one of the sources for Cassirer's own theory of ethics and law, which he presented in his book on Hägerström. On Cassirer's view, just as written law prejudices the future, so too individual moral judgments are not momentary feelings, but relational in nature²⁶ because ethical judgments must involve temporality: a view of the past, the future, and an overview of both²⁷. By contrast, feelings are simply momentary events. Cassirer's book on Hägerström is sympathetic but critical, and his arguments there, as he wrote in the preface²⁸, deal with matters he had neglected before. But the extent to which Cassirer's thought moved beyond his earlier writing was greater than this or any of his publications revealed.

Cassirer's unpublished philosophy

Cassirer published only a fraction of what he wrote during his Swedish years. This was partly due to the fact that it was difficult for writers in exile generally to find a publisher for German books. The other reason was that most of Cassirer's innovative writing from the late 1930s remained in the form of first drafts or manuscripts that were obviously written in order to work out his new philosophy for the first time. Instead of reworking a text, Cassirer went on to write another one that took him into other new areas. He left all these materials in Sweden when he and his wife went to America and he never was able to return to them. What they lack in polish, they repay in novelty. The first six volumes of the *Nachlass edition* consist of these late systematic writings. Other volumes include historical studies from his years in Sweden, such as his Goethe lectures from 1940–1941²⁹. Cassirer succeeded in finishing one complete book from this late program but was unsuccessful in finding a publisher. This book, *Ziele und Wege der Wirklichkeitserkenntnis*, like the final, fourth volume of his *Erkenntnisproblem* were both finished before he left Sweden. The latter came out after the war, first in English translation in 1950 and then in German in 1957, while the former work did not appear until 1999 in the Cassirer *Nachlass edition*. The title *Ziele und Wege der Wirklichkeitserkenntnis* plays on the titles of two publications by the

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philosopher Hans Reichenbach: *Ziele und Wege der physikalischen Erkenntnis* and *Ziele und Wege der heutigen Naturphilosophie*. Cassirer sought in his book to avoid both traditional metaphysics and the positivistic program represented by Reichenbach. The first sentence of Cassirer's book set the tone for his approach:

Thomas Hobbes hat einmal gesagt, daß von allen Erscheinungen, die uns umgeben, das 'Erscheinen selbst' die merkwürdigste und wunderbarste Tatsache sei³⁰

– a claim which, Cassirer then adds, was remarkable coming from Hobbes, who was perhaps the most consistent materialist and mechanistic thinker in the history of philosophy. Cassirer's point was that a phenomenological approach was compatible with even the most radical empiricism. In *Ziele und Wege* and other texts from the late 1930s Cassirer introduced his own phenomenology with its three *Basisphänomene* or basic phenomena, which he most often referred to as the phenomena of *Ich, Du, Es* (I, You, It). This is a striking development, unknown from his writings before he came to Sweden. Whereas Cassirer's earlier philosophy of symbolic forms transformed Kantianism into a philosophy of inter-subjective media, Cassirer's phenomenology, with its three Basic phenomena, was not Kantian in any sense of the word. It did not permit raising Kant's transcendental question of the conditions of the possibility of the phenomena at hand – for basic phenomena are existential facts, and if such a question could be raised about them, then we would, by definition, not be talking about *basic* phenomena. The *Basisphänomene* doctrine was a "realism", for it was the real processes, not our words or thoughts about them, that Cassirer thematized. Cassirer is explicit about the reality of the Basisphänomene: "They are 'prior' to all thought and inference and are the basis of both".³¹

Cassirer did not become a phenomenologist in the usual sense of the word, i.e., the phenomenological school of Husserl. Cassirer distanced himself from Husserl,³² who as a follower of Descartes granted subjectivity the main role in philosophy. Cassirer wanted with his phenomenology neither to create a new kind of philosophical science or first philosophy outfitted with special methods as Husserl did nor did he conceive phenomenology as Heidegger did, with the aim of establishing a philosophy of existence in opposition to empirical natural or cultural sciences. Cassirer treated phenomenology in much the same way as Charles Peirce (1839-1914) did, for whom phenomenology was the doctrine of the most general, irreducibly different kinds of phenomena. Peirce also sometimes referred to his three basic phenomena – which he called categories – as I, You, and It. Peirce's three phenomenological "categories" are not simply elementary aspects of cognition, but the "features that are common to whatever is *experienced* or might conceivably be experienced or become an object of study in any way direct or indirect." Peirce further describes Phenomenology as

a science that [...] just contemplates phenomena as they are, simply opens its eyes and describes what it sees; not what it sees in the real as distinguished from any figment –not regarding any such dichotomy – but simply describing

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the object, as a phenomenon, and stating what it finds in all phenomena alike.³³

In this respect, his phenomenology and Cassirer's doctrine of the *Basisphänomene* are deeply similar. Cassirer's *Basisphänomene* doctrine formulated what everybody was familiar with but which was incapable of explanation because explanations always presuppose them. Cassirer did not return to traditional realism (going back to Aristotle) and take these phenomena as kinds of things or – to use the metaphysical term – *substance*. Cassirer claimed that if we attend to phenomena – and not to our words for them – then we cannot take substance as fundamental:

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.³⁴

Cassirer worked out his new phenomenology between 1934 and 1940 in the series of texts which are appearing in the first six volumes of the *Nachlass edition*. The doctrine of basic phenomena dovetailed with Cassirer's development of the anthropological dimension of his philosophy, for which he drew upon the theoretical biology of Jakob von Uexküll. In Uexküll's theory of the *Bauplan* the anatomy of the organism included its particular *Umwelt* or surrounding world, which is a function of its particular anatomy. Cassirer had already lectured about Uexküll's concepts of the *Umwelt* and *Bauplan* in March 1929 at Davos, where his famous debate with Martin Heidegger took place. Heidegger took up Uexküll's conceptions that winter in his lecture course at Freiburg on *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt– Endlichkeit–Einsamkeit*³⁵ in which he distinguished between the *worldlessness* of things, the *world poverty* of animals, and the fact that humans are able to form worlds.³⁶ Cassirer developed his conception of Uexküll's doctrine in various texts, including his Gothenburg lecture course on the philosophy of culture. Unlike Heidegger, Cassirer did not conceive philosophy or philosophers to possess truths that are inaccessible to other disciplines or thinkers, but rather to deal with questions in more general terms; it questioned the presuppositions which govern all human activities, including the interrelationships that individual disciplines ignore. For example, Cassirer did not just consider Uexküll's *Bauplan* and *Umwelt* as a way to focus upon existence. He took up the philosophy of biology during his years in Sweden,³⁷ seeking in particular to show how biological theories and semiotic doctrines interact. Both are present in his conception of human beings as *animal symbolicum*. Cassirer's approach bears comparison to views found today in the work of Terrence Deacon³⁸ and other biosemioticians.

Cassirer did not concentrate on the sciences alone, but sought to understand the structurally and historically different forces and forms in all areas of culture. His philosophy began with phenomenology and the basic phenomena of existence and with the realization that all phenomena are symbolically pregnant. So even phenomenology was interpretative. Cassirer regarded human existence as fundamentally cultural and historical, so that it was always subject to different conflicting forces. This meant more than

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developing a theory of the way different aspects of culture such as myth, language, art, history, technology, science, morals and law interact with one another. It demanded an investigation of the possibilities for developing an ethics which could claim applicability in such a complex cultural world.

More on philosophy in Sweden

The Uppsala school³⁹ of Axel Hägerström was radically anti-metaphysical. For Hägerström, the language of metaphysics is not false, it is meaningless, consisting of word combinations without a referent.⁴⁰ But while Hägerström found metaphysics empty or meaningless, Cassirer regarded metaphysical systems critically for a different reason. For him, they were not meaningless, but rather reductionistic in the sense that they took some particular perspective, a particular view, say, of the nature of "form" to offer a characterization of reality in general.⁴¹ Cassirer claimed that such different philosophers as Bergson, Husserl, and Heidegger all made this same mistake, but did so in different ways. So too Hägerström (like the Vienna school) took the basic phenomenon of the *Es* to be the only one that was truly real, in particular at the expense of the phenomena of the *Du* or *the Other*. This was why Hägerström was so critical of the view that the *Geisteswissenschaften* could ever really be sciences at all. For Cassirer, this viewpoint suffered from an insufficient conception of form.⁴² In addition to the measurable forms of physical processes, cultural forms such as art display symbolic form. When an artist creates an individual work of art, that work possesses a kind of generality seen in its influences on its viewers, including other artists, whose works display this influence (changes in style or theme). This kind of influence is not mechanical, but it is not merely subjective for it depends upon objective symbolic media (works of art).⁴³

Cassirer's interest in the philosophical study of culture was not merely theoretical. He recognized that the great problem for philosophical ethics in the modern world lies in the conflict between different cultural conceptions of morality, and he saw, too, that if philosophy was to deal with these conflicts, it was necessary for it to develop an adequate science of culture or *Kulturwissenschaft*. This in turn demanded taking the phenomenon of *the Other, das Du*, in terms of cultural meaning, particularly the symbolic function of expression. Cassirer asserted that the phenomenon of *the Other* exemplified a unique symbolic function: the *Ausdrucksfunktion* ("expressive function"). In the mid-1930s he wrote a text to explain this, which he entitled *Die Objektivität der Ausdrucksfunktion* ("The objectivity of the expressive function"). He used parts of this manuscript in conjunction with lecture courses on *Probleme der Kulturphilosophie* in the winter of 1939–1940.⁴⁴ He opposed Hägerström's claim that expressive phenomena were "merely subjective", but unlike phenomenologists he did not take them to be something purely intuitive, i.e., immediately given. The predominance of expressive phenomena in culture, both in the perception of others and of the world, was a basic fact for Cassirer. He explained this in the second study of his book *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences on The Perception of Things and the Perception of Expression*. After the age of myths, human beings remained deeply responsive to expressive, visual meaning. Other forms of culture could assume the function of myth, but they could never eradicate the place of myth in society. For rationalistic philosophies, this

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was a kind of residue of the past. For Cassirer it followed by necessity from the nature of symbolic processes as they are found in living beings. During his years in Sweden Cassirer sought to understand how symbolism and biology interact – in human and in prehuman life. This led him to regard gesture and other expressive forms of meaning as the new key to cultural theory.

Sol invictus!

In 1949 Cassirer's wife wrote to a young Hamburg scholar that her husband had never put his own fate in the foreground, but "that he suffered terribly to see what the National Socialist movement had made out of Germany".⁴⁵ The formulation "made out of Germany" was meant literally, for in his last book, *The Myth of the State*, Cassirer claimed that the National Socialists had invented a new technology, which could only be implemented in the 20th century, "our great technological age", a technology not for governing, but for controlling people, which Cassirer called the "technique of myth". This technology enabled those in power to reintroduce elemental "mythical" forms of acting, thinking, and feeling into modern society by means of modern administrative methods of organization and communications technology. This made it possible to influence people's imagination and therewith their emotions and so to control their behavior.⁴⁶

When Cassirer gave his final public lectures in Sweden about the poet and dramatist Goethe, they were not simply a reflection of his dedication to Goethe as a thinker and poet, but an example of what he sketched in his drafts for *The Myth of the State*, an illustration of how artistic forces could counter those of myth.⁴⁷ Mythic thought is emotionally strong, but it is not free. Mythic beliefs are rigid and permit no exceptions to their tabus and view of the world. This rigidity stems from the prominence of fear in mythic beliefs. In *The Myth of the State* Cassirer returned to the tradition of Spinoza and Hume when he claimed that the only way to overcome an emotion like fear is by an even stronger emotion. Such emotional states as laughter and love are forces capable of subverting authority. Art and literature are capable not only of portraying such feelings, they are able to encourage them. This view, which today is associated with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin in literary theory or with Martha Nussbaum in philosophy, can be found in many of Cassirer's writings from the 1930s. Literature in particular, Cassirer thought, offered what myth could not – a comic catharsis that liberates from fear. This view, known today through the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin derived from Bakhtin's reading of Cassirer. As Brian Poole has proven, Bakhtin made extensive use of Cassirer's texts, translating whole passages, even pages, without quotation marks, so that some of the canonical statements attributed to Bakhtin actually derive from Cassirer's pen.⁴⁸

This aspect of Cassirer's work – his theory of myth and its application to modern social phenomena – went back to his work in the 1920s at the Warburg library in Hamburg, but his most extensive examinations of expressive phenomena in culture are found in his unpublished manuscripts from his years in Sweden. In Cassirer's late program for the study of culture he now treated contemporary cultural life in terms of a new philosophical

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anthropology in which expressive symbolism is shown to have as great an importance in modern societies as it does in primitive ones. Some of his work on this topic, such as *The Myth of the State* (1946), has been available, but never in its full scope.⁴⁹ It is not possible here to explicate Cassirer's texts on historicity and myth,⁵⁰ his lectures on philosophical anthropology (1939–1940),⁵¹ his views of expression,⁵² and his theory of basic phenomena⁵³. They show how during the late 1930s and early 1940s Cassirer sought to synthesis in his philosophy all the different dimensions of human culture – art, science, politics, history, and philosophy – when they appeared to be disintegrating as never before.

Cassirer's last work from these years was a year-long series of lectures he gave on Goethe. The lectures dealt with every aspect of Goethe's work and contain discussions of his whole literary output. Cassirer admitted at the beginning of the lectures that in giving them he was gratifying a life-long wish, for he had never before given a lecture course that dealt mainly with poetry and drama. It would be impossible here to summarize his text, but I can quote his closing words: "sol invictus!"⁵⁴ For Cassirer, Goethe's writing – both what he wrote and the way he wrote (Cassirer examines Goethe's language in philological detail) – was the best representative of the capacity of literature to liberate the mind. His lectures on Goethe also stand as a comment on his own attempt in philosophy to find a new, less rigid form of thought that avoided the pathos of philosophical Romanticism and the confinements of Positivism.⁵⁵ Cassirer's writings from his years in Sweden, when taken together, covered all the topics he ever dealt with before and many new ones as well. His attempts to "answer" his Swedish colleagues' criticisms forced him to indicate with new definiteness what in the past was often only vaguely recognizable: that he was a philosopher in his own right, belonging to no school of thought. At no time in his life was Cassirer's originality as clearly expressed as it was during his Swedish years. From the point of view of his philosophy, they were the most important in his life.

1 See this classic study for its discussion of Cassirer: Müssener, Helmut: *Exil in Schweden: Politische und kulturelle Emigration seit 1933*. München 1977, 284f.

2 Köhnke, Klaus Christian, John Michael Krois, and Oswald Schwemmer (eds.): *Ernst Cassirer. Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*. Hamburg 1995ff.

3 Cassirer, Ernst: *Determinismus und Indeterminismus in der modernen Physik. Historische und systematische Studien zum Kausalproblem*. (= Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift; 42 (1936) 3).

4 Cassirer, Ernst: *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften. Fünf Studien*. (= Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift; 48 (1942) 1) 1–139; A new translation of this work by S. G. Lofts is available: Cassirer, Ernst: *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences. Five Studies*. New Haven 2000.

5 C. F. von Weizäcker: Review of "Determinismus und Indeterminismus in der modernen Physik" by Ernst Cassirer". In: *Physikalische Zeitschrift*.

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38 (1937), 860–861.

6 The Cassirers returned to their Hamburg home only to pack their belongings and make arrangements for a long term absence.

7 Cassirer's first letter to Jacobsson, thanking him for the invitation to come to lecture in Sweden, is dated "21.X.27". Various difficulties prevented him from making the trip until 1934. The Jacobsson–Cassirer letters are housed at the Landsarkivet in Gothenburg.

8 Svante Nordin and Jonas Hansson of the University of Lund are to publish a chronology documenting Cassirer's years in Sweden, including the arrangements for his professorship.

9 See Cassirer's recollections of this in "Tal till Studenterna". In: *Göteborgske Spionen. Organ för Göteborgs högskolas studentkår*. 2. Juni 1939, 1–3.

10 See Cassirer, Ernst: "Thorilds Stellung in der Geistesgeschichte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts". In: *Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademiens Handlingar*. 51 (1941) 1, 1–125; Idem.: "Thorild und Herder". In: *Theoria*. 7 (1941), 75–92 and idem.: "Descartes und Königin Christina von Schweden". In Cassirer, Ernst: *Descartes. Lehre – Persönlichkeit Wirkung*. Stockholm 1939, 177–278. The Swedish translation (*Drottning Christina och Descartes*. Stockholm 1940), Svante Nordin discovered, follows a different manuscript from the German one in the Descartes book.

11 See Cassirer, Ernst: "Goethe-Vorlesungen". In: Köhnke, Klaus-Christian, John Michael Krois, and Oswald Schwemmer (eds.): *Ernst Cassirer. Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*. Volume 11. Hamburg 2003.

12 See Cassirer, Ernst: *Axel Hägerström – Eine Studie zur schwedischen Philosophie der Gegenwart*. (= Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift; 45 (1939) 1) 1–119.

13 Cassirer, Ernst: "Inhalt und Umfang des Begriffs. Bemerkungen zu Konrad Marc-Wogau". In: *Theoria*. 2 (1936), 207–232.

14 Idem.: "Zur Logik des Symbolbegriffs". In: *Theoria*. 4 (1938), 145–175.

15 Idem.: "Was ist 'Subjektivismus'?". In: *Theoria*. 5 (1939), 111–140.

16 Petzäll, Åke: *Logischer Positivismus. Versuch einer Darstellung und Würdigung der philosophischen Grundanschauungen des sog. Wiener Kreises der wissenschaftlichen Weltanschauung*. (= Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift; 37 (1931) 3).

17 Cassirer's letter to Reichenbach from the 11th of June 1931. The Cassirer–Reichenbach letters are housed at the University of Pittsburgh Library.

18 Cassirer's letter to Petzäll from the 05th of August 1933. The Petzäll–

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Cassirer letters are housed at the University Library in Lund.

19 See Krois, John Michael: "Ernst Cassirer und der Wiener Kreis". In: Friedrich Stadler (ed.): *Elemente moderner Wissenschaftstheorie*. Wien/New York 2000, 105–121.

20 See Cassirer's letter to Albert Görland ("Göteborg, 26. November 1938") published in: Cassirer, Toni: *Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer*. Hamburg 2003, 264–266.

21 See the comments in Cassirer, Ernst: *The Myth of the State*. New Haven 1946, 286 about the "most dreadful" experience of the last years.

22 Otto Neurath quoted after Horace M. Kallen: "Postscript – Otto Neurath 1882–1945". In: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 6 (1946), 533.

23 Confer *Göteborgs Högskolas Matrikel 1916–1941*. (= Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift; 6 (1942), 16).

24 An English translation of the lecture appeared under this title in Donald Phillip Verene (ed.): Ernst Cassirer: *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935–1945*. New Haven/London 1979, 49–63.

25 See Hägerström, Axel: "Is Positive Law an Expression of Will?". In: Karl Olivecrona (ed.): *Inquiries into the Nature of Law and Morals*. Stockholm 1953, 17–55; Confer Cassirer's assessment in Cassirer 1939, like in footnote 12, 106–108.

26 Cassirer 1939, like in footnote 12, 53ff.

27 Ibid., 65.

28 Ibid., 6–7.

29 Köhnke, Krois, and Schwemmer, like in footnote 11.

30 Cassirer, Ernst: "Ziele und Wege der Wirklichkeitserkenntnis". In: Klaus Christian Köhnke, John Michael Krois, and Oswald Schwemmer (eds.): *Ernst Cassirer. Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Werke*. Volume 2. Hamburg 1999, 3.

31 See Cassirer, Ernst: "Über Basisphänomene". In: *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*. In: Klaus Christian Köhnke, John Michael Krois, and Oswald Schwemmer (eds.): *Ernst Cassirer. Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Werke*. Volume 1. Hamburg 1995, 132: "Sie sind 'vor' allem Denken und Schließen, liegen diesem selbst zu Grunde." An English translation of this text appeared as "On Basis Phenomena". In: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume 4: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*. New Haven 1996, 137.

32 Confer Köhnke, Krois, and Schwemmer 1995, like in footnote 31, 171f.

33 These citations are from Hartshorne, Charles and Paul Weiss (eds.):

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Peirce. Collected Papers. Volume 5. Cambridge 1935, paragraph 37.

34 Cassirer, Ernst: "Language and Art II". In: Verene 1979, like in footnote 24, 193–194.

35 See Heidegger, Martin: *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt–Endlichkeit–Einsamkeit. Gesamtausgabe.* Vol. 29/30. Frankfurt/Main 1983.

36 See *ibid.*, 263: "1. der Stein (das Materielle) ist weltlos; 2. das Tier ist weltarm; 3. der Mensch ist weltbildend."

37 See Cassirer, Ernst: *The Problem of Knowledge: Philosophy, Science, and History since Hegel.* New Haven/London 1950, 118–216. Confer *idem.*: *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit. Vol. 4: Von Hegels Tod bis zur Gegenwart (1832–1932).* Herausgegeben von Tobias Berben (= Gesammelte Werke. Bd. 5.) Hamburg 2000, 137–252.

38 Deacon, Terrance W.: *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain.* New York 1997.

39 For a survey of the Uppsala school and philosophy in Sweden generally, see Nordin, Svante: *Från Hägerström till Hedenius. Den Moderna Svenska Filosofin.* Lund 1983.

40 Cassirer 1939, like in footnote 12, 16f.

41 *Ibid.*, 18 and Köhnke, Krois, and Schwemmer 1995, like in footnote 31, 150–165.

42 The first four studies in *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences* (see footnote 4) seek to refute this view.

43 See on this Study 3: Cassirer, Ernst: "Concepts of Nature and Concepts of Culture". In: *Idem.* 2000, like in footnote 4, 56–58.

44 Both will appear in: Klaus Christian Köhnke, John Michael Krois, and Oswald Schwemmer (eds.): *Ernst Cassirer. Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Werke.* Volume 5. now in press.

45 Toni Cassirer's letter dated "20.8.49" to Dr. Hans-Joachim Lang, in Bottin, Angela (ed.): *Hamburger Akademische Rundschau (Nachdruck). Begleitband. Berichte, Dokumentationen, Register.* BerlinHamburg 1991, 127 (= Hamburger Beiträge zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Bd. 10, Teil 4): "Ich möchte zur Erklärung immer wieder wiederholen, daß mein Mann niemals sein Schicksal in den Vordergrund gestellt hat," but "daß er unsagbar gelitten hat unter der Vorstellung, was die Nationalsozialistische Bewegung aus Deutschland gemacht hat." I thank Eckart Krause for bringing this letter to my attention.

46 See Cassirer 1946, like in footnote 21, 277–296.

47 *The Myth of the State* was published without including Cassirer's concluding discussion of these questions. The Cassirer edition *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte* (see footnote 2) will publish

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these drafts in their entirety in Volume 9.

48 See Poole, Brian: "Bakhtin and Cassirer. The Philosophical Origins of Bakhtin's Carnival Messianism". In: *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 97. 3 (1998), 537–578.

49 Cassirer's previously unpublished drafts for *The Myth of the State* will be published in *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*. (see footnote 2) Volume 9.

50 Confer Köhnke, Klaus Christian, John Michael Krois, and Oswald Schwemmer (eds.): *Ernst Cassirer. Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*. Volume 3. Hamburg 2002.

51 Idem.: Ernst Cassirer. *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*. Volume 6. in preparation.

52 Idem., like in footnote 44.

53 Idem.: Ernst Cassirer. *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*. Volume 1, 2, 4. Hamburg 1995ff.

54 Köhnke, Krois, and Schwemmer 2003, like in footnote 11, 231.

55 For a discussion of this tendency in Cassirer's philosophy see Friedman, Michael: *A Parting of the Ways. Carnap, Cassirer, Heidegger*. Chicago 2000.