

Open Sesame! The Magical Words of the World of Meaning of Human Beings: Dialectical Harmony of the Symbolical Forms

Açıl Susam! İnsanın Anlam Dünyasının Büyülü Sözcükleri: Sembolik Formların Diyalektik Harmonisi

Ümit KARTAL

Asistant Prof., Muş Alparslan University, Philosophy Department, Muş, Türkiye
Dr. Öğretim Üyesi, Muş Alparslan Üniversitesi, Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi, Muş, Türkiye

ORCID: 0000-0002-8440-2968 | Email: umutkartal@gmail.com

Article Information/Makale Bilgisi

Cite as/Atıf: Kartal, Ü. (2023). Open Sesame! The Magical Words of the World of Meaning of Human Beings: Dialectical Harmony of the Symbolical Forms. *Van Yüzüncü Yıl University the Journal of Social Sciences Institute*, 61, 123-140.

Kartal, Ü. (2023). Açıl Susam! İnsanın Anlam Dünyasının Büyülü Sözcükleri: Sembolik Formların Diyalektik Harmonisi. *Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 61, 123-140.

Article Types / Makale Türü: Research Article/Araştırma Makalesi

Received/Geliş Tarihi: 19 July/19 Temmuz 2023

Accepted/Kabul Tarihi: 5 September/ 5 Eylül 2023

Published/Yayın Tarihi: 30 September/Eylül 2023

Pub Date Season/Yayın Sezonu: September/Eylül

Issue/Sayı: 61 **Pages/Sayfa:** 123-140

Plagiarism/İntihal: This article has been reviewed by at least two referees and scanned via a plagiarism software./ Bu makale, en az iki hakem tarafından incelendi ve intihal içermediği teyit edildi.

Published by/Yayıncı: Van Yüzüncü Yıl University of Social Sciences Institute/Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü

Ethical Statement/Etik Beyan: It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited/ Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur (Ümit KARTAL).

Telif Hakkı ve Lisans/Copyright & License: Yazarlar dergide yayınlanan çalışmalarının telif hakkına sahiptirler ve çalışmaları CC BY-NC 4.0 lisansı altında yayımlanmaktadır./ Authors publishing with the journal retain the copyright to their work licensed under the CC BY-NC 4.0.

Abstract

Ernst Cassirer was made an original contribution to the philosophy of the twentieth century with his genuine series of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Cassirer evaluates the various moments of culture from an integral perspective. Cassirer's contribution to the philosophical agenda was reinforced by the works *An Essay on Man* and *The Myth of the State*. These latter works, however, go beyond mere repetition and summary of Cassirer's thought. Particularly, *The Myth of the State* is important to confront a problem left open by Cassirer's integral philosophy of culture; the return of myth that consolidates contemporary political thought and action. Cassirer defines culture as the progressive process of human emancipation; analyses the element of culture in dialectical harmony, without reducing one to the other. Although Cassirer presents a systematic philosophical framework, it triggers a series of questions waiting to be resolved within itself. In this study, first, the aspects of Cassirer's philosophy of culture that give the opportunity to comprehend the various dimensions of the human beings' world of meaning will be discussed in detail. Then, it will be tried to describe the depth and limit of the original cultural analysis revealed by this systematic approach to update itself in the face of a historical problem.

Keywords: Symbolical forms, the world of meaning, culture, self-knowledge, history, political myths

Öz

Ernst Cassirer *Sembolik Formlar Felsefesi* yapıtıyla yirminci yüzyıl felsefesine özgün bir katkıda bulunmuştur. İnsanın dünyayla kurduğu iletişim ve etkileşimin sembolik boyutunu kuşatıcı bir biçimde ele alan bu çok yönlü çalışmada Cassirer kültürün muhtelif uğraklarını bütüncül bir bakış açısıyla değerlendirir. Cassirer'in felsefi gündeme sunduğu katkı *İnsan Üstüne Bir Deneme* ve ölümünden sonra yayımlanan *Devlet Efsanesi* yapıtlarıyla pekiştirilmiştir. Ne var ki bu son yapıtlar yalnızca Cassirer'in düşüncesinin basit bir tekrar ve özetinin ötesine geçerler. Özellikle *Devlet Efsanesi* Cassirer'in bütüncül kültür felsefesinin açıkta bıraktığı bir sorunla yüzleşmek bakımından önem taşır; mitosun çağdaş siyasal düşünce ve eylemi katılaştıran geri dönüşü. Cassirer kültürü insan özgürleşiminin yenilikçi süreci olarak tanımlar; kültürün öğelerini diyalektik harmonisinde, birini diğerine indirgemeksizin, çözümler. Bir kültür metafiziğinin mevcut sorunları ortadan kaldıracığı şüphelidir ancak kültüre ilişkin bütüncül bir bakış sunacak felsefi bir çerçeve hala güncel bir ihtiyaçtır. Cassirer böylesi bir çerçeveyi sunmakla birlikte kendi içinde çözüme ulaştırılmayı bekleyen bir dizi soruyu tetikler. Bu çalışmada öncelikle Cassirer'in kültür felsefesinin, sembolik bir varlık olarak insanın anlam dünyasının muhtelif boyutlarını kavramaya fırsat veren yanları ayrıntılı olarak ele alınacaktır. Ardından bu sistematik yaklaşımın ortaya koyduğu özgün kültür çözümlemesinin tarihsel olarak karşılaştığı bir problemle kendini güncellemesinin derinlik ve sınır ortaya konmaya çalışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sembolik formlar, anlam dünyası, kültür, kendini bilme, tarih, siyasal mitler

Introduction

Ernst Cassirer wrote *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* in the absence of an English translation of his three volumes of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. It was written in English and published in the USA fifteen years after the last volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1929) and a year before Cassirer passed away. There is indeed a fourth volume of the work compiled under the subtitle of *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms* which brings various writings of Cassirer considered as sequel to the oeuvre. Contrary to the interpretive literature, in the Preface, Cassirer emphasizes that this *Essay* is “a fresh start” and “an entirely new book,” it is not mere summary of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1992, p. vii). Regarding the persistent requests of an English translation of the former works, Cassirer finds it “impracticable” and “unjustifiable to reproduce the former book [PSF] in its entirety” (1992, vii). What makes it impracticable and unjustifiable, for him, on the one hand, is because of the difficulty and abstractness of the subject and, on the other, because of some novelties of Cassirer’s own approach based on the outcomes of his continuous work on the same subject. The first novelty of the *Essay on Man* can be seen in Cassirer’s reconsideration of the basic meaning of sign and symbol by adding this relationship a new one: signal. Regarding this novelty, we see the influence of Susan Langer on Cassirer. Of course, the relationship between those two distinguished philosophers is considerably mutual, rather than being one-sided. Auxier holds that “Cassirer probably took his distinction between signal (used interchangeably with “sign”) and symbol from Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), because the first time he ever made such a distinction was in *An Essay on Man* (1944; 1992), even if he made it differently from Langer” (1997, p. 94). The second significant point is Cassirer’s approach toward history. History, for him, is not “a narration of dead facts and events,” but an organon of self-knowledge (1992, p. 206).

Cassirer holds that for a systematic philosophy of culture, self-knowledge, knowledge on human nature is of a central importance. He raises a radical critique against the groundless assumption of animal rationale as the fundamental characteristics of human beings. However, for Cassirer, if there is such a thing as human nature it is not fixed, static, and substantial, but a dynamic and functional one. The polyphony of human nature can only be heard by means of a medium that has same characteristics, namely, symbolism. Therefore, the philosophy of symbolic forms (philosophy of culture or philosophical anthropology) sets up a new agenda before the whole project of philosophy. It must do away with the traditional western metaphysics based on the logic of being. Nevertheless, Cassirer is not content with the philosophical empiricism as much as philosophical idealism. The latter annihilates the diversity and the difference of the symbolic universe, while the former cuts us off from the universal by being immersed in particularity. The task of the philosophy of symbolic forms is to grapple with “the dynamics of the giving of meaning” and “the riddle of becoming of [symbolical] forms” (Cassirer, 1996, p. 3). Cassirer holds that a human being is an animal symbolicum (1992, p.

26). She, as “a subject-object of culture,” is also a historical creature (1996, p. 35). The tragedy of being a historical creature lies in the fact that historical events cannot be repeated or reversed. The only possible way to deal with this historical factuality is to reconstruct it, since they belong to the past and are no longer subject to observation, or empirical reconstruction. Thus, to decipher the book of human nature and culture, philosophical anthropology needs to appeal to a new measurement or method, namely, hermeneutics, descriptive analysis, or continuous interpretation and reinterpretation.

Before proceeding to focus on a presentation of Cassirer’s novelties in the *Essay on Man*, I will begin with the story of Ali Baba and Plato’s metaphor of the cave. It is so stereotypical to compare the east and west in terms of binary oppositions, namely, heart and mind, irrationality and rationality, oral culture and written culture, uncivilized and civilization, and so on. Here I do not intent to make a comparison and contrast between the occidental and oriental modes of thinking, though it would be a useful one concerning how symbolic forms bound to temporal and, in a broad sense, spatial limits. Nor I present a critique of this nonsensical and partial reading of west-east dichotomy. What I am interested in is to point out the significance of the symbolic process in the way of human beings’ search for meaning. Especially, I will try to point out Cassirer’s genuine endeavor to embrace all cultural symbolic forms in their own peculiarities and dialectical relations to each other without reducing any of them to pre-established metaphysical assumptions.

1. The Caves: Plato and Ali Baba

The principle of symbolism, with its universality, validity, and general applicability, is the magic word, the Open Sesame! giving access to the specifically human world, to the world of human culture. E. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*

Let us wander off the subject a little bit more. Ali Baba and Forty Thieves is a part of medieval Arabic literature, though, it is a matter of contention whether it is a later addition to One Thousand and One Night. Story simply goes like that. In contrast to his brother Cassim’s voracity, Ali Baba is a naïve man. One day, Ali Baba, a poor woodcutter, happens to see a group of thieves in front of a cave. He overhears that they spell a word, open sesame, in order a self-opening enormous stone door to let them enter the cave. After they leave the cave, he tries to enter the cave and let out the words: open sesame! As he steps into the cave, he realizes that it is a kind of storehouse where they hoard the precious stuff they stole. Like Pandora’s Box, once the door is open it is no longer easy to predict or have control over what will follow. In the same way of all eastern storytelling, the story of Ali Baba contains a great deal of life-lessons. It is a life changing experience both for Ali Baba and the world around him. However, the magical word, open sesame, is a precondition for this experience, that is, for entering the cave.

Plato, however, cautiously distinguishes two modes of thinking, that is, a careful distinction between $\mu\theta\omicron\varsigma$ and $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$, the employment of mythological examples and

metaphors is a prevalent theme as a pedagogical tool. Hundreds of years before the story of Ali Baba, in the West, Plato held his famous analogy of cave, which represents a paradigmatic example to understand the constitution and conception of reality along with a specific kind of metaphysics determined the western intellectual history, namely, metaphysics of being. To understand the phenomenal world, that is, the world of becoming, we first need to leave aside what belongs to unreliable sense perception and to turn toward what lies behind them. As to Plato, the relation between the knower and object known manifest itself in the hierarchy of a divided line. What is real and gives the reality to the rest is not the world of becoming, but the world of being. Contrary to Ali Baba's experience, Plato's analogy of cave aims at leading us out of the cave by means of a philosophical system, a metaphysic, in which ethical, epistemological, and ontological overlapped through a single but fundamental concept: being.

Either to enter or leave out the cave, the world of meaning of human beings entails a starting point, that is, a ground on which the rest can be built up. Once the magical word spelled out, there appears the polyphony and polychromy of the human nature and culture. As to Cassirer, what is of great significance for a systematic philosophy of culture that aims at arriving objectivity and universality without sacrificing the diversity and individuality is a constant critique of the western metaphysical tradition based on a "safety first" guiding principle (Dewey, 2008, p. 230).

2. Animal Symbolicum

The world of meaning of human beings is not a closed circle that moves within itself towards perfection, repeating itself always in the same way and same order. Nor is it a straight line moves forward without any intervention. Amid the excessiveness and criminality of the twentieth century, at a time one could hardly hold on to the idea of progress, Cassirer wrote his three volumes of *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* as a search for a systematic philosophy of culture in which he took on an implicit analysis and critique of the collapse of the world of meaning of human beings. For Cassirer, the world of meaning of human beings can be understood as a progress, process, and self-liberation in terms of dialectical unity of symbolic forms. However, this is not a sheer optimism that eliminates the apparent conflicts of different aspects of symbolical forms, but the subtext of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* provides us an insightful forewarning, namely, what will happen if the diversity and difference of the symbolical universe is destroyed by means of the domination of one of the symbolical forms for the sake of unity and homogeneity.

The first half of the twentieth century is an extraordinary example of the collapse of the world of meaning of human beings in which the progressive and liberal aspects of symbolic modes of culture fall victim of the ideological terror in which Cassirer had his share. Cassirer was not engaged in politics. He did not write on specifically on politics either. Nevertheless, in his last works, *An Essay on Man* (1944) and *the Myth of State* (1946, published posthumously) we can find some implications about politics. In the *Essay on Man*, Cassirer claims that there is a mutual relationship between consciousness and

culture. And in *the Myth of State*, he investigates into the intellectual roots of the experience of totalitarianism. As for Cassirer, symbolic forms give way to self-liberation. He states, "Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science, are various phases of this process" (1992, p. 228). However, in the course of history we witness that these symbolic forms are subject to collapse. In the first volume of *the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer explicitly points out the reason behind the conflicts of cultures. He states that "The particular cultural trends do not move peacefully side by side, seeking to complement one another; each becomes what it is only by demonstrating its own power against the others and in battle with the others" (1970, p. 82). Then the problem arises out of claiming that a particular cultural symbolic form is "the very core of objective and 'real'" (Cassirer, 1970, p. 85).

Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms reveals itself in a significant shift from the critique of reason to the critique of culture (1970, p. 80). The eclipse of reason, the disillusionment and disappointment of the fundamental claim to rationality brought about new questions and new approaches regarding older questions before philosophy and social sciences. Thus, Cassirer states, "reason is a very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man's cultural life in all their richness and variety" (1992, p. 26). Nevertheless, the rejection of the assumption of rationality as the sole decisive and governing factor of being human does not necessarily lead us to its opposite, namely, irrationality. Rather, it requires a meticulous and sophisticated analysis of all aspects of the world of meaning of human beings beginning from materiality up to spirituality without neglecting any one of them and without seeking a hierarchy or domination among them. Though, certain complex animals, such as the anthropoid apes, have developed some symbolical behavior, Cassirer holds that symbolism is the distinguishing hallmark between organic and spiritual life. Symbolism is "the threshold of the human world" (1992, p. 31). Thus, the task of philosopher is to find out the structure of the meaning through a new medium outside the one-dimensional and reductive claim to rationality. For reasoning does not necessarily entail thinking, its business is to reason, provided that primary principles are given. The experience of totalitarianism, both in its ideological thinking and its actuality, was an indubitable example of the failure of the western thought's claim to rationality.

Cassirer's theory of human nature centers on a radical rejection of the reductive assumption of human nature based on rationality. A human being, for Cassirer, is an animal symbolicum. If there is such a thing as human nature it can be grasped as *vinculum functionale* intertwined with the symbolical universe. This universe, for Cassirer, consists of different and diverse, even conflicting, components such as language, myth, religion, and history. Moreover, all these symbolical forms are "the modes of spiritual formation" (1966, p. 1). As far as human beings are concerned, life has a meaning beyond the mere organic life. Spirituality is therefore the distinguished mark. Nevertheless, Cassirer persistently holds that there is no symbolical faculty in human

beings; neither fixed, nor predetermined. Despite the diversity in their manifestations, as to Cassirer, each symbolic form is a unitary energy of the human spirit and the spirit is nothing but the sum total of the dialectical interplay of symbolic forms.

In addition to Cassirer's meticulous investigation of the individual forms of culture, his project was focused on grasping the human culture as totality revealed by means of the dialectical interplay of the symbolical forms. Therefore, the task of a systematic philosophy of culture is to grasp this symbolical universe as an "organic whole" and to discover the common bond that holds them together (1992, p. 68). There is this strong tendency in Cassirer's philosophy of culture to arrive at universality, but it is fundamentally differing from the logic of being. Rather it seeks to find out the structure of the becoming of meaning, that is, beyond both the philosophical idealism and pure empiricism. He argues that there is a methodological dilemma between these two distinct ways. He argues that,

If we hold fast to the postulate of logical unity, the universality of the logical form threatens ultimately to efface the individuality of each special province and the specificity of its principle –but if we immerse ourselves in this individuality and preserve in our examination of it, we run the risk of losing ourselves and finding no way back to the universal (1970, p. 84).

To discover human nature and culture requires, as to Cassirer, to appeal to "all the available empirical evidence," but Cassirer was by no means an empiricist (1992, p. 69). By means of a systematic philosophy of culture, Cassirer endeavors to find out a dialectical unity among these polymorphic and variegated forms of culture without neglecting the particularity and avoiding the universal. Cassirer then asserts that the symbolic universe of human beings has a dynamical and harmonical balance and this balance issues from the confliction between the contrarities within the realm of symbolical universe.

3. Sign, Signal, and Symbol

For Cassirer, we need a new medium to grapple with discovering the world of meaning of human beings. Thus, as to him, this medium is the symbolic character of the world of meaning of human being. However, where or how one begins to understand this structure is still of a great significance. Cassirer holds that "in our study of language, art, and myth the problem of meaning takes precedence over the problem of historical development" (1992, p. 70). Then, regarding the symbolic forms, historical priority or posteriority does not give legitimacy for the assertions of inferiority or superiority among them. Cassirer's philosophy of culture rejects both the traditional western philosophy's unquestioned and arrogant trust on the claim of rationality and positivist approaches that underestimates certain aspects of the world of meaning of human beings such as mythology, religion.

Science is a late product of human culture, but it is not the ultimate stop of the humanity. Cassirer agrees that myth and religion, the oldest forms of the human symbolism, are the most conservative ones, but he refuses to concur with the positivistic approaches that holds these forms are belong to the childhood or immaturity of the human culture. In the formation of the dynamics of meaning, in the process and the progress of human culture they still have a distinguished place. Cassirer's philosophy of culture thus prescribes us a new lens to recover the nearsightedness of the reductionist approaches. There is, as to Cassirer, a progress in the realm of human *Kultur*, in a broad sense of the word, but it is not provided through the Hegelian *aufhebung*, but through a Heraclitean dialectical harmony stemming from the conflicts of different modes of symbolical forms. Nevertheless, Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms does not offer us an absolute relativism. Cassirer aims at establishing a universal and systematic philosophy of culture that embraces all different and diverse aspects of human culture.

Then, it is a crucial point for Cassirer to give a definition of symbols in general and its difference from sign and signal. Being a symbolical animal is the distinguished hallmark of a human being. Therefore, Cassirer begins his argument with distinguishing the human world from the world of animals. In his argumentation, Cassirer makes use of the biological theory of Johannes von Uexhüll (1864-1944). Reality for Uexhüll, Cassirer states, "is not a unique and homogeneous thing; it is immensely diversified, having as many different schemes and patters as there are different organisms" (1992, p. 24). Cassirer acknowledges Uexküll's original scheme of the biological world. Uexküll refuses to accept the distinction between lower and higher forms of life. For him "life is perfect everywhere; it is the same in the smallest as in the largest circle. Every organism, even the lowest, is not a vague sense adapted to (*angepasst*) but entirely fitted into (*eingepasst*) its environment" (1992, p. 24). Every organism "possesses a certain receptor and effector system." Only by means of the cooperation of these two systems an organism can survive. He calls this functional circle of the animal. Cassirer takes on Uexküll's scheme to figure out if it could be used "for a description and characterization of the human world." Nevertheless, human world, for Cassirer, has its own distinguishing characteristic. He says, "man has ... discovered a new method of adapting himself to his environment." Therefore, there must be a third link and it is the symbolic system. In this symbolic system, we encounter with an essential feature, "a new dimension of reality," which "transforms the whole of human life" (1992, p. 24). Therefore, it is no use in appealing to the animal world to grasp the dimensions of this distinguished characteristic of human beings. Cassirer holds that the phenomenon of human speech is the ground where we find this genuine characteristic of human beings.

Cassirer acknowledges certain findings of the psychologists who focused on animal behaviors, but he was reluctant and radically critical on the extension of these findings to the understanding and explanation of the phenomenon of human behavior. According to Koehler's research on chimpanzees, Cassirer states, we find certain patterns of expression by gesture. They do express their "rage, terror, despair, grief, pleading, desire,

playfulness, and pleasure,” by means of gesture, but there is still a fundamental discrepancy between the human and animal mode of signification (1992, p. 24). In the mode of signification of animal world Cassirer argues that there are “no signs which have an objective reference or meaning” (1992, p. 29). Signs, signals, and symbols completely belong to two different universes. While symbols belong to the human world, signals belong to physical world of being. Symbols functions as designators, but signals are only operators. Signals, Cassirer holds that, “have ... a sort of physical or substantial being,” and he adds that “symbols have only functional value” (1992, p. 32). The case of Helen Keller, a blind dead and mute child, shows us that the fact of symbolism cannot be grasped by appealing to the physical world. Keller’s discovery, “everything has a name,” proves that “a human being in the construction of his human world is not dependent on the quality of his sense material,” and he maintains that “man can construct his symbolic world out of the poorest and scantiest materials” (1992, p. 36). What Cassirer points out here is not a rejection of the sensuous aspect of process of the formation of meaning, but a surplus that there is no parallel in the animal world, namely, relational thought. Through his pioneer work, *the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer seeks for the articulations of human world of meaning beginning from the spatial orientation of bodily experience up to the pure signification. It is only human beings that reach out this level of signification and it is only possible by means of her symbolical characteristic. “A sign or signal,” Cassirer holds, is “related to the thing to which it refers in a *fixed* and *unique* way” (1992, p. 36, emphasis added). On the other hand, a symbol is not only universal, but it is variable and mobile as well. These latter characteristics are, as to Cassirer, the distinguishing characteristic of the world of meaning of human beings that marks the “freedom and almost unlimited scope of human linguistic designations,” of which the mode of signification of the animal world lacks (1966, p. 332). Cassirer holds,

We do find, however, in man a special type of relational thought which has no parallel in the animal world. In man an ability to isolate relations- to consider them in their abstract meaning- has developed. In order to grasp this meaning man is no longer dependent upon concrete sense data, upon visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic data. He considers these relations ‘in themselves’ (1992, p. 39).

The difference between the human speech and the communication in the animal world is then expressed by two genuine characteristics of human speech. “The dematerialization of the signs,” which means “a communication without material samples,” is the first characteristic (1966, p. 332). The second characteristic is “the detachability,” which is revealed through use of names in human speech. Cassirer maintains that they are “no longer a part of the thing to which they point” (1966, p. 332).

4. A Return of/to Myth: *The Myth of the State*

There is a difference in terms of interpreting the uniting and dividing lines of Cassirer’s philosophy. Following Meland, it can be said that there are three distinct

understandings regarding classification of Cassirer's philosophy (2010, p. 237-238). There is on the one hand, "intellectual biography" approach, based on following Cassirer's intellectual emigrant route which is based on the inner transformation of Cassirer's thought. But this approach depends on the assumption that Cassirer's thought is "same throughout these different phases" (Meland, 2010, p. 238). Meland holds that the second approach to Cassirer's thought is determined by his three volumes of *the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Meland calls this *structural approach* since it is based on the idea that all of the Cassirer's ideas can be reduced or traced back to *the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (2010, p. 238). Yet, there is, as to Meland, a third way of understanding Cassirer's work which can be derived from the *Essay on Man's* structure, namely *dialogical approach* (2010, p. 238). Here we are not interested in the question of classifying Cassirer's work in terms of a single principle, but considering this threefold division of understanding Cassirer's work, we are more prone to follow the third alternative as it can be clearly seen the general course of our interpretation. The scope of Cassirer's writings ranges from natural sciences to cultural sciences. But there is a distinct understanding peculiar to Cassirer's thought regarding how these two seemingly different spheres of science interact. The division between natural and cultural in science runs parallel to analytical and continental philosophical traditions in philosophy. Thus, Cassirer's philosophical attitude toward this division is determined by his giving "equal philosophical attention" to both sides. In doing so, he excels any other German philosophers after Kant (Friedman, SEP, 2022). On the other there is a systematic approach characterizing Cassirer's philosophy in terms of Neo-Kantianism and phenomenology. Though, one still needs to keep in mind that Cassirer's Kantianism depends on a distinct transformation, in his words, transformation of the critique of reason to critique of culture. And regarding his phenomenology, to differentiate it from the contemporaneous understanding, it must be noted that it is influenced by Hegelian understanding of it (Verene, 2011; s. 45-60). There is a tension between Cassirer's early and late conception of myth (Meland, 2010, p. 246). In his early period there is an explicit emphasis on epistemology, on the other hand in the late period is of implicit political incentives. But it is important not to ignore Cassirer's interpretation of culture's diverse forms in terms of a harmony in conflict which is evident from the beginning of his oeuvre. As to Pedersen, Cassirer's two different conceptions of myth cannot be seen as a total rejection, but a re-modelling of the former one (quoted from Meland, 2010, p. 248). Rather than a reductionist approach, Cassirer's work is in a search for grasping the universe in its plurality. Thus, in Grosholz's terms, the context of the search for irreducible plurality of the universe differs from the Hegelian and Kantian complete and unified system approaches as well (2010, p. 695).

Cassirer was by no means a political philosopher. Though his last work, *The Myth of the State*, can be considered a genuine contribution to the corpus of modern political theory, one still needs to make clear the nature of this genuineness (Schrems, 1967, p. 180). Cassirer's initial aim at writing a work on politics is essentially because of serious challenge posed by the modern factual reality of nazi ideology against his full frame

explanation of culture in terms of harmonious unity. Cassirer's abrupt interest in politics caused by a forced encountering with the actual political agenda leads us to compare him in a sense to Kant at some point:

While Kant openly took a stance in support of republican cosmopolitanism against absolutist power, enthusiastically applauding the French Revolution in spite of its traumatic and inevitable side-effects, Cassirer, in his turn, had to confront the totalitarian ideology of Nazism in the field of the History of Ideas... (Aramayo, 2019, p. 275).

Cassirer claims that myth ends where philosophy begins (1946, p. 182). Therefore, *The Myth of the State* aims at dealing with the understanding of "the struggle against myth in the history of political thought" (1946, p. 51). In this work Cassirer, however, turns his attention to the historical roots of myth to making sense of its actual return. He especially deals with the worship of hero and race myths derived from the understanding of Carlyle and Gobineau. Nevertheless, he grapples with any example of the actual political myths. (Mali, 2008, p. 145). Myths' foundational aspects became yet a distinguished issue within the realm of social sciences after Cassirer, especially after the World War II (Mali, 2008, p. 141). The fundamental problem for Cassirer is to question the reemergence of myth within the political realm and its invasion of the social and cultural life altogether. Such a questioning is parallel to that of human consciousness. For social consciousness of human beings is of two aspects: identification and discrimination. Myth is a genuine resort to one's making connection to the community with a distinct sense of belonging, and it is thus a focal point in terms of social identity. Myths are in this sense not only fictional but foundational stories as well (Mali, 2008, p. 138). Thus, the driving question for Cassirer as follows: "How was it that a militaristic and genocidal regime (German National Socialism) could usurp a constitutional liberal-democratic republic with such extraordinary rapidity and with so little resistance?" (Bailey, 2010, p. 54). Therefore, the essential question is rather how humans as rational beings were convinced to those fabricated myth than how Nazi's used myths (Mali, 2008, p. 148). Cassirer binds this return of myth to losing intellectual center of the age:

But the mythical monsters were not entirely destroyed. They were used for the creation of a new universe, and they still survive in this universe. The powers of myth were checked and subdued by superior forces. As long as these forces, intellectual, ethical, and artistic, are in full strength, myth is tamed and subdued. But once they begin to lose their strength chaos is come again. Mythical thought then starts to rise anew and to pervade the whole of man's cultural and social life (1946, p. 298).

Myths, fabricated by those who are in power, suspend the individuality, but gives individual a sense of belonging, namely an identity gained only through being a distinct member of the community by giving herself in completely. In this manner without being

aware of the paid price, the individual is granted a pseudo freedom and happiness which are totally illusory:

But here are men, men of education and intelligence, honest and upright men who suddenly give up the highest human privilege. They have ceased to be free and personal agents. Performing the same prescribed rites they begin to feel, to think, and to speak in the same way. Their gestures are lively and violent; yet this is but an artificial, a sham life. In fact they are moved by an external force. They act like marionettes in a puppet show-and they do not even know that the strings of this show and of man's whole individual and social life, are henceforward pulled by the political leaders (1946, p. 286).

Cassirer in his last years endeavors to go through his views on myth in the face the destructive return of the myth affecting all the realms of life. But it is clear from a close reading of his work, it can easily be seen that Cassirer provides us neither an examination of any actual political myth, nor offers a solution to overcome this form of evil which is destroyed social and cultural life. It is yet possible to understand his last effort, as he emphasized in *The Philosophy of Enlightenment*, to overcome evils caused by the state and society, one still needs to draw “clear insight into the grounds and origins of abuses [of reason]” (Cassirer, 1951, p. 267). Thus, it also defines the essential tension and conflict between Cassirer’s theoretical and practical philosophy.

Thus, he endeavors to make some rectifications on his former theory of myths (Mali, 2008, p. 137). Even though Cassirer’s former explanation of myth is not exactly run parallels to the positivistic theory of social progress yet, it still falls short of giving a complete understanding of modern political myths. In his late and untimely intervention, we see a distinct phenomenon, an ages’ passing view on the political issues. Voegelin, in his acknowledgement of Cassirer’s last contribution to philosophy, notes that such a melancholic acknowledgment does not only bid farewell to the erudite philosopher himself, but it is also a nostalgia for a passing age’s way of philosophizing (1947, p. 445). Contrary to the attentive and deferential attitude of Voegelin, another distinct philosopher of politics, Leo Strauss holds Cassirer, by following Hermann Cohen, responsible for the silent disappearance of ethics within the agenda of philosophy regarding his philosophy of symbolic forms, and moreover Strauss claims that Cassirer was a distinguished philosopher of philosophy, but not a philosopher; he was erudite, but had no passion (1959, p. 246). Voegelin’s interpretation marks the untimely, in fact belated, character of Cassirer’s contribution. Nevertheless, there is a distinct return to Cassirer’s philosophy since a while. And this turn is essentially marked by ethico-political reading of Cassirer (Meland, 2010, p. 235). Skidelsky binds this turn, “Cassirer renaissance” as he calls it, to political reasons (2008, p. 7). Cassirer’s untimely and belated thoughts on politics may not be a guide to complete and comprehensive understanding of politics on his time, but regarding the current political issues which come to the fore all

around the world in which anti rationalist and reactionary populist movements come forward, reading Cassirer anew may shed light on the issues at hand and pave the way for thinking them genuinely (Bailey, 2020, p. 62; Coskun, 2007, p. 155).

Cassirer examines political myths by means of four essential aspects in which political sphere was shaken to the foundations. Bailey sums up these four essential aspects as such:

1. the inculcation of an overwhelming sense of fatalism: that there is no way of escaping the present crisis from conventional, constitutional means. ...fabricat[ing] blueprint for ... changes, and thus encourag[ing] a collective desire for salvation at the hands of charismatic leaders offering 'miracle cures.'
2. the state needs to 'proclaim a single, simple supreme value around which all members of society could find true unity, one which could not permit another value next to it. The supreme value could be a race, a nation, or an ethnically-defined community'.
3. all other ethical or other forms of cultural cultivation that might contradict the supreme value, and thus sow doubt as to its inviolate sanctity, are to be declared null, void and rendered ineffective, often through campaigns of violent vilification and denigration.
4. the introduction of new political rites that cultivate a culture of mass, permanent hysteria and encourage an attitude of unquestioning acquiescence (Bailey, 2020, p. 55-56).

Cassirer admits that myths are foundational stories that leads to identification of individual to the society, but he wants to make us realize that there is a distinct discrepancy between the ancient and modern conception of the myth making function. The former is a kind of natural creative process towards individuals' interaction with the natural and cultural environment, the last is a kind of mechanical fabrication. Myth has strong relation with the magic. Ancient understanding of myth in its relation to magic emerges in the desire of having control over the natural world. But the relation of myth to magic in the modern understanding is essentially based on the desire of having control over the social world. In comparison with our examples of Ali Baba's and Plato's adventures of entering and leaving the cave, the emphasis on the magic is on the side of having control over the natural world, technically speaking the issue at hand is essentially epistemological with its ontological repercussions. On the other hand, modern world's extremities such as totalitarian experiences from all sides of the political ideologies displaced the emphasis and put it over having control over the social world. Barash claims that politics became problematic issue of philosophy in the late 19th century in Europe and in the 20th century it became more problematical than ever before because of the radicalization of political tendencies in the Europe (2000, p. 121). With reference to Herman Heller, he added that the outcome of this radicalization is the

fictionalization of politics (2000, p. 124). The hiatus between reality and politics thus became gruesome. It can be summed up in Mussolini's reckless division between the myth of the state and its correspondence to reality (Barash, 2000, p. 125).

The Myth of the State published posthumously comes to the agenda of the intellectual public within the same year of the publication of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* in which the distinguished thinkers of the Critical Theory, Horkheimer and Adorno, propose an interesting theory regarding the Enlightenment. Contrary to the mainstream conception of the Enlightenment, even the Enlightenment's own self-understanding, they see in the tradition just what it claims to part away from, namely mythos: "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. xviii). There is thus, in the Enlightenment, a reversal and a regress to the mythos. Voegelin concurs with the Critical Theory's grappling with the sinister relationship between myth and reason. As to him Cassirer's claim to overcoming myth through reason is a kind of "problematical victory" because he concludes that "*The Myth of the State* is written as if it had never occurred to the author that tampering with a myth, unless one has a better one to put in its place, is a dangerous pastime" (1947, p. 447). Although Cassirer values reason over myth, he is also influenced by Romantic's reaction to the Enlightenment's reductive rationality principle. However, he does not share Romantics' contempt for science (Grosholz, 2010, p. 695). Yet Leo Strauss sees Cassirer's attitude towards the Enlightenment and Romanticism ambiguous, he considers Cassirer's philosophy as a form of aestheticism which is essentially a mark of romanticism (1959, p. 295).

Concluding Remarks: History and Politics as Organon of Self-Knowledge

In his genuine distinction between the two modes of signification by means of the meticulous analysis of the opposition between signs, signals, and symbols, Cassirer, in his *Essay on Man* discusses an important aspect of the world of human meaning: history. It is of great importance for a systematic philosophy of culture that struggles to understand the symbolical world, since the world of meaning of human beings radically differs from the physical world. Therefore, its methodology must be distinguished from the methods of natural science that deals with the physical facts.

A human being is a creature of culture and of history. On the other hand, culture is not something homogenous, it rather has different constituents such as myth, religion, language, science, art, history. Moreover, these different symbolical forms of the world of human culture appear in human experience as "a perpetual strife of diverse conflicting forces" (1992, p. 71). A philosophy of culture must do away with the logic of being to save the particulars, but at the same time it needs to reach out a universal synthetic approach to grasp the totality of culture amid this apparent confliction. In this respect Cassirer's reconsideration of history and historian explicitly refers to the terminology of the Heraclitean dialectics. A historian, then, needs to learn how to discover the hidden harmony beyond the apparent strife of conflicting forces. To grasp the culture as an

organic whole, a historian must go beyond being a mere annalist or a chronological narrator of the historical events, since “language, art, myth, religion are no isolated, random creations. They are held together by a common bond” (1992, p. 68). A historical fact differs radically from a physical fact. It is not subjected to observation or experiment since uniqueness and irreversibility are the fundamental characteristics of historical facts. Cassirer holds that “in order to possess the world of culture we must incessantly reconquer it by historical recollection. But recollection does not mean merely the act of reproduction. It is an intellectual synthesis – a constructive act” (1992, p. 186). Therefore, the task of history is determined by a ceaseless interpretation and reinterpretation of the dialectical interplay of the different and diverse modes of symbolic forms. Historical facts cannot be observed, experimented, or reproduced, but they can be reconstructed ideally. Historical knowledge, therefore, belongs to hermeneutics. It is a subject of semantics, rather than physics. Historical knowledge does not seek for an objective knowledge of the external things, but it is intrinsically a self-knowledge of human beings insofar as a human being is understood as a symbolical animal.

Even if sociability is not only a distinct ability of human beings, but the components of symbolical forms is also, for Cassirer, the constitutive elements for a higher form of the social life. Through them human beings develop a social consciousness. This social consciousness, Cassirer holds, “depends upon a double act, of identification and discrimination.” And he maintains that “man like the animals, submits to the rules of society, but in addition, has an active share in bringing about, and an active power to change, the forms of social life” (1992, p. 223). Therefore, a genuine philosophy of culture entails a systematic approach to embrace all the aspects of the world of meaning of human beings, namely, the symbolical universe. This universe is, for Cassirer, a totality and a harmonic unity insofar as it is grasped in a proper way that reveals the dialectical harmony between the world (not-I or the object) and the subject (I or consciousness) through a distinct understanding of symbolism. Then, the question that is up in the air and is open to a further question is: if the world of human culture is in fact a harmonic unity or not. If it is harmonical then how can we explain the clashes within the context of a particular culture or outside this familiar comfort zone, namely, intercultural context. Or one needs to ask if it is not a harmonic unity, then one still needs to ask the question of how it is to be achieved and maintained? As it is presented above Cassirer has a genuine answer to the first question. Nevertheless, the latter question is left to unsolved. How can the implications of this genuine philosophical analysis of culture be translated into the practical and political action? It is quite clear that Cassirer, except his last and untimely work, did not write directly on politics or political aspects of symbolic forms, but his work is rich enough to pave the way a tenable approach. Thus, so-called Cassirer renaissance is not just an incidental return to his works, or it is not solely based on certain professional academical interest. But the clashes in the modern world which shake down the political realm requires us once more to delve into the difference and diversity of cultural life at large. Cassirer’s work then provides us rich critical source to begin with.

References

Aramayo, R. R. (2019). The kantian background to Cassirer's political commitment and its parallelisms with Kant's republicanism and support of the French Revolution. *Contextos Kantianos: International Journal of Philosophy*, No: 9, 274-92.

Auxier, R. (1997). Susanne Langer on symbols and analogy. *Process Studies* V, 26(1-2), 86-106.

Bailey, M. (2020). Cassirer, fatalism and political myth: historical lessons in the consequences of pessimism for international relations. In *Pessimism in International Relations: Provocations, Possibilities, Politics*, (53-66). Springer.

Barash, J. A. (2000). Political mythologies of the twentieth century in the perspective of Hermann Heller, Ernst Cassirer, and Karl Löwith. *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem*, No: 6, 121-33.

Cassirer, E. (1946). *The myth of the state*. New Heaven: Yale University Press.

Cassirer, E. (1951). *The philosophy of enlightenment*. (F. C. A. Koelln and J. P. Pettegrove, Trans.). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Cassirer, E. (1966). *The philosophy of symbolic forms*. volume 3: The phenomenology of knowledge. (R. Manheim, Trans., C. H. Hendel, introductory notes). New Heaven and London: Yale University Press.

Cassirer, E. (1970). *The philosophy of symbolic forms*. volume I: Language. (R. Manheim, Trans., C. H. Hendel, Preface and Introduction). New Heaven and London: Yale University Press.

Cassirer, E. (1992). *An essay on man: An introduction to a philosophy of human culture*. New Heaven and London: Yale University Press.

Cassirer, E. (1996). *Philosophy of symbolic forms*. volume 4: The metaphysics of symbolic forms. (J. M. Krois and D. P. Verene, Edited by, J. M. Krois, Trans.). New Heaven and London: Yale University Press.

Coskun, D. (2007). The politics of myth: Ernst Cassirer's pathology of the totalitarian state. *Perspectives on Political Science*, 36(3), 153-67. DOI: 10.3200/PPSC.36.3.153-167.

Dewey, J. (2008). A quest for certainty. In *The later works of John Dewey* volume 4, 1925-1953. (J. A. Boydston, Edited by, S. E. Toulmin, Introduction by). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Grosholz, E. R. (2010). The humanism of Ernst Cassirer. *The Hudson Review*, 62(4), 691-698.

Horkheimer, M. and T. W. Adorno. (2002). *Dialectic of enlightenment. Philosophical fragments*. (G. S. Noer, E., Edited by, Jephcott, Trans.). Standord, California: Stanford University Press.

Friedman, M. (2022). "Ernst Cassirer", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2022 Edition), (E. N. Zalta, edited by.). <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/cassirer/>>.

Langer, S. (1942). *Philosophy in a new key: A study in the symbolism of reason, rite, and art*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Mali, J. (2008). The myth of state revisited: Ernst Cassirer and modern political theory. In *The Symbolic Construction of Reality: The Legacy of Ernst Cassirer*, (135-162). Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Meland, I. (2010). Rehabilitating Ernst Cassirer and his philosophy—four recent contributions. *SATS*, 11, 235-256.

Schrems, J. J. (1967). Ernst Cassirer and political thought. *The Review of Politics*, 29(2), 180-203.

Skidelsky, E. (2008). *The last philosopher of culture*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Strauss, L. (1959). *What is political philosophy and other studies*. Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe.

Verene, D. P. (2011). *The origins of the philosophy of symbolic forms: Kant, Hegel, and Cassirer*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Voegelin, E. (1947). The myth of the state. *The Journal of Politics*, 9(3), 445-447.

Publication Ethics

The author declares that all ethical principals and rules were followed in data collection, analyses, and reporting process.

Ratio of Author Contribution

This article was written by one author.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.