

Przemysław Parszutowicz (2013): Fenomenologia Form Symbolicznych. Podstawowe Pojęcia i Inspiracje „Późnej” Filozofii Ernsta Cassirera. [Phenomenology of Symbolic Forms. Basic Concepts and Inspirations of Ernst Cassirer’s Later Philosophy]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, (Polish Academy of Science). 332 pages, € 6,45.

The recent surge of interest in Cassirer’s philosophy, predominantly focusing on the problem of Cassirer’s concept of symbolism and its relation to the work of Cohen and Natorp, prominent members of the influential Marburg School of neo-Kantianism, can be attributed to the publication of some of Cassirer’s work which was previously unknown, written during the period when he left Germany due to political unrest and emigrated to Sweden and the USA. One of the books that tackles the topic of Cassirer’s symbolism in an intelligent and erudite way was written by Professor Przemysław Parszutowicz and published in 2014 in Poland by the Polish Academy of Sciences. It is a noteworthy and methodically organized monograph that analyzes lesser-known and usually disregarded aspects of Cassirer’s philosophical output.

The monograph reconstructs the system of Ernst Cassirer’s later philosophy and is structured according to the author’s conviction that Cassirer’s philosophy represents a coherent unity. The objective of Cassirer’s philosophy, according to Professor Parszutowicz, was to establish a systematic “logic of cultural sciences” as a supplement to the “logic of natural sciences” developed by Cohen. The term ‘logic’ is used in its specific neo-Kantian meaning and denotes a system of principles that constitute the conditions of possibility of scientific knowledge, in this case concerning cultural phenomena. Its most mature articulation can be found in the philosopher’s crowning achievement, published at the pinnacle of his academic career: *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. The monograph focuses mainly on the last two volumes of the aforementioned work and the (until very recently) unpublished manuscripts referred to commonly as *Nachlass*. Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy is analyzed against the backdrop of the rival philosophical stances of the time when Cassirer elaborated his own philosophical system centered on the concept of symbolism.

The monograph is divided into three parts. In the introduction and the first chapter the influence of Hermann Cohen’s philosophy on Cassirer’s idea of the logic of cultural sciences is discussed. Although Cassirer gradually distanced himself intellectually from Cohen, he retained several important features of Cohen’s rendition of Kant’s philosophy, especially the fundamental assumption of the Marburg School of neo-Kantianism regarding the systematic character of the forms of cognition (knowledge has to be perceived holistically, as a transcendently ordered structure, in which the conditions of possibility of knowledge are defined; in Cassirer’s terminology one has to speak about the primacy of function over the object). Cassirer nevertheless shifted his attention

towards the research focused primarily on the processes of symbolization (unlike the Marburg School, he was particularly interested not in the purely logical but in the noological sphere, i.e., the sphere of spiritual and cultural activity) and engaged in a series of polemics with other influential philosophers of culture at the turn of the 20th century (Simmel, Burckhardt, Dilthey), arguing with them from an unorthodox neo-Kantian position.

In the second part of the monograph, Professor Parszutowicz steps into yet uncharted territory and discusses hitherto neglected or lesser-known facets of Cassirer's philosophy, namely his fascination with Husserl's phenomenology and *Gestalt* psychology (Wertheimer, Köhler, Koffka). Cassirer dubbed his *Philosophy of Symbolical Forms* "phenomenology of culture", thus signaling his interest in investigating the realm of culture by means of "idealizing abstraction". In order to accomplish this, Cassirer introduces the concept of symbolic pregnancy (the concept bears obvious resemblance to the *Gesetz der Prägnanz* employed by Gestalt psychologists but is applied to the sphere of cultural sciences) which is defined as a tendency of the process of perception to reach the level of the utmost simplicity and typicality of the perceived phenomenon, as a drive for attaining the form of the phenomenon that most appropriately encapsulates its specificity. By introducing this concept Cassirer emphasizes the fact that the most distinctive feature of cultural sciences (the procedure of decoding the content of cultural objects) consists of identification of the investigated phenomenon as a mere element of some meaningful whole. The perceived manifestation of the cultural content (our experience of the object) is "pregnant with meaning". Cassirer thus determines the specificity of his own philosophy of culture and its methodological and objective autonomy. The symbolic form is an *a priori* condition of the possibility of experiencing the given phenomenon, but it is the intuitive content itself that contains the possibility of the holistic interpretation. Symbolic pregnancy is therefore the distinctive function of the consciousness, the ideal nexus and point of reference for the particular "here and now" perceived phenomenon, that enables it to obtain a certain entirety of meaning.

This second part of the monograph is undoubtedly the most intriguing, containing an extended discussion of the influence of *Gestalt* psychology on the work of Cassirer. A main asset of Professor's Parszutowicz monograph is that it explains Cassirer's thought as a polemical voice, as an answer to some urgent and interesting questions which emerged from a dialogue with the most prominent scientists, intellectuals and philosophers of the beginning of the 20th century. Cassirer looked for inspiration in *Gestalt* psychology, in the theory of invariants proposed by Felix Klein in his famous lecture on geometry, and in Helmholtz's, Gelb's and Hering's work on color perception etc.: because, as Professor Parszutowicz argues, the fundamental intuition underpinning Cassirer's

philosophical work was similar to that of these scholars. Cassirer maintained that the epistemological structure of every form of human knowledge displays a certain type of functional invariant, that is it possesses not fundamental basic elements or fundamental constituents (a stance typical of the substantial perspective, denounced and discarded by Cassirer) but fundamental laws of transformation between those elements (functional perspective). According to Cassirer, the goal of philosophical investigation should be the search for and reconstruction of those invariants, and the pursuit of the laws of transformation of contingent sensory data, just like in Klein's group theory or in *Gestalt* psychology.

The third chapter, entitled *Metaphysics of symbolic forms*, discusses the fourth volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and reconstructs Cassirer's endeavor to build a certain type of metaphysics. Cassirer reintroduces into his philosophical discourse the notion of primal or basis phenomena, which comprise the class of phenomena irreducible to any kind of aprioristic function or faculty of mind. The introduction of the basis phenomenon (derived from Goethe's works) is necessary in order to explain and substantiate the philosophy of symbolic form and the notion of symbolic pregnancy as a tendency for spontaneous self-organization of meaning. The basis phenomena are the fundamental *datum* of consciousness. Cassirer distinguishes three types of primal phenomena – Life, Activity and Work – which comprise a dialectical triad and are mirrored by the grammatical structure of language (I, You and It, respectively). It has to be stressed that basis phenomena are not the ontologized categories made up in the process of pure speculation but they rather express the modality of human lived experience in the already-given world. Cassirer's remarks regarding the primal phenomena represent – according to Professor Parszutowicz's interpretation of Cassirer's work – an attempt to underpin the whole system of philosophy of symbolic forms and at the same time to embed the content of experience in primal intuitions.

The monograph is cleverly and clearly written. It is an interesting, lucid and absorbing book that contains only as much technical jargon as is required in order to discuss the topic and not to oversimplify it; some prior general knowledge of Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy and *Gestalt* psychology is also required. Nevertheless, it is a highly commendable book for professional researchers, within the fields of both psychology and philosophy.

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