Preface

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The original idea for this volume dates back to a conference on the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer held in Copenhagen June 3rd and 4th, 2005, titled *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms and the Question of Human Nature*. The aim of the conference, and thus also of this volume, was to draw attention to the multifaceted productivity of Cassirer's philosophical thinking. To the original German and Danish contributions from the conference new articles from Nordic Cassirer scholars have been added. The anthology thus presents Cassirer's philosophy from the vantage point of a broad selection of German and Nordic Cassirer Scholars.

As a major figure of the German philosophical landscape before the Second World War, Cassirer merits careful attention from the historian of philosophy. In addition, Cassirer's philosophy calls for investigation on its own terms. Cassirer's philosophy of culture within the program of a *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* especially leads to pioneering ideas in modern philosophy. Along these lines, two routes to a fruitful encounter with the philosophy of Cassirer present themselves—the historical and the systematic approach. Although neither approach is represented in its pure form, the two types of readings can be useful to classify the contributions to this volume. John Michael Krois points to the systematic importance of Cassirer's philosophy. Krois specifies how Cassirer initiated a “symbolic turn” in philosophy, the consequences of which have not been fully realized until now. Christiane Schmitz-Rigal and Peer F. Bundgaard concentrate on the systematic importance of this symbolic turn for modern philosophical discussions in physics and aesthetics respectively. Oswald Schwemmer shows how, if the traditional antagonism between the philosophies of Cassirer and

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Heidegger are set aside for a moment, a productive and complementary reading of the controversy between Cassirer and Heidegger can take form. Aud Sissel Hoel presents and champions Cassirer's philosophy of symbols against Jacques Derrida's post-modern version. Steen Brock interprets Cassirer's philosophy as playing out the continuous effort to sharpen the reflective comprehension of the various forms of experience that make up human culture, alongside their interconnectedness and their differences. Ernst Wolfgang Orth, on the other hand, elucidates the significance of Cassirer's concept of culture in its historical and philosophical embeddedness. The investigation into the historical embeddedness, interdisciplinary discussions, and debates of Cassirer and his colleagues is further developed by Ursula Renz in discussing Cassirer's concept of myth throughout the development of his writings, by Martina Plümacher in relation to interdisciplinary research on cognition, by Frederik Stjernfelt in connection with the status of biology as a science, and by Sirkku Ikonen with regard to Cassirer's interpretation of expressive phenomena.

The diverse perspectives cast on the philosophy of Cassirer in this volume all insist on the importance and novelty of his thought. The contributions do not give a neat unified picture of Cassirer the philosopher. Rather, taken as a whole, they mirror a stance of key importance within Cassirer's philosophy, namely that thought specifically and human culture generally are characterized through a "harmony in contrariety, as in the case of the bow and the lyre" (Cassirer 1944, 228); the contributions hence show how his philosophical thinking points in many directions, but also how the many are united through the common frame of Cassirer's main philosophical concepts—symbol, form, and culture. As a supplement to the articles, a short outline of basic concepts in the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and a few sketches of the historical setting of Cassirer's work are presented below.

1 Philosophy of symbolic forms

The concept of symbolic form, which constitutes the basis of Cassirer's mature philosophy, launches a new approach to philosophy. Its precondition is the assertion that human culture in its diversity must be understood as a joint undertaking. Diverse human activities and ventures, such as the development of myth, language, art, and science, share a basic characteristic: they all establish an active symbolic reshaping of the perceptual world. The concept of symbolic form is constructed to encompass and signify the processes and products of the spontaneous human reaction to the sensuous given. To recognize myth, language, art, and science as symbolic forms amounts to investigating the different ways of grasping and coming to terms with the adjoining environment. The philosophy of symbolic forms thus provides the theoretical and systematic footing for Cassirer's philosophy of culture.

The symbolic constituent in the concept of symbolic form refers to the particular context of meaning in diverse symbolic forms. All symbolic forms generate distinctive contexts of meaning and thus develop and shape different structures of our shared sensuous world. The fact that Cassirer does not simply talk about different symbolizations, but different symbolic forms, points to the necessary and intricate interplay between the contexts of meaning and their material manifestations and figurations. According

to Cassirer, ascribing meaning to the world implies reshaping the very same world into material signs. Such material signs can range from the modulation of air in the human mouth when speaking—a modulation which has to be kept relatively stable in each re-enactment of a word if the utterance is to be meaningful—the mythical meaning of, say, a pattern of settlement where inhabitants of the eastern and western quarters are assigned different meanings, to the canonical notations of mathematics, such as the symbol ‘ dy/dx ’ for the algorithm of differentials. Concerning the last example, Cassirer, with reference to Leibniz, argues that the mathematical construction of meaning depends upon the erection of a universal mathematical language of signs, a *characteristica generalis*. Cassirer employs this idea of a universal language of signs to explain the unifying bond between all the different symbolic forms. This joint undertaking of the symbolic forms is accounted for by showing how their different contexts of meaning all rely on a common claim to ideal meaning, which is produced through forming and reshaping the material world into signs and carriers of this meaning. The *characteristica generalis*, the common language of signs, unites the different symbolic forms through the function of meaning construction. In a variety of ways human experience, understanding, and knowledge are interwoven with the physical environment which, by means of the symbolically restructured forms, discloses exactly this experience, understanding, and knowledge.

This aspect of the material sign is a necessary precondition for the transformation of human experience into meaning. This process implies an intersubjective conception of meaning. For example, the symbolic form of myth, with its figurative and concrete symbolic language, clearly relies on an intersubjective enactment of the meaning constituents for its comprehensibility. The concrete material shaping of the environment—the opposition between the holy and the profane conditioning the pattern of settlement, and the meaning attributed to cultural and physical differences between humans, as well as to different animal species and the four quarters of the heavens, to mention a few instances—bears evidence to the intersubjective character of the process of meaning construction. In mythical societies the individual rarely has the option of stepping back to reflect on how to interpret social relations, rituals, or other patterns of meaning in society. Rather, mythical knowledge and meaning are engraved in the physical surroundings and the practical actions of the whole of the societal organization. This engraving of ideal meaning onto the physical environment might not be comprehended as individual acts by the people living in social organizations pervaded by mythical meaning structures. Nevertheless it is the result of a common balancing of many individual efforts, considerations, and actions. Conventional meaning only evolves through the collective recognition of the same efforts, considerations, and actions. Thus, the structure of individual actions is combined with a collective set of references resulting in an intersubjective formation of meaning.

The symbolic form of myth takes up a unique position in the assembly of the symbolic forms. Cassirer argues that myth constitutes an original matrix out of which all other symbolic forms emerge. Thus Cassirer claims, firstly, that the instruments for understanding and cognizing the world emerge out of the endeavour to understand and know it. Secondly, he identifies the mythical construction of meaning as the most basic, serving as the necessary ground from which the other and different symbolic forms can develop. While the aspirations and objectives of the different symbolic

forms part ways with myth, their adherence to the fundamental features of the process of an intersubjective reshaping of given material to convey the meaning of a specific symbolic form binds all of the more sophisticated symbolic forms to myth. The concept of symbolic forms thus conveys a holistic conception of meaning.

One singular sign cannot carry any meaning without being part of a greater context of reference. This context of reference is itself built upon practical interaction with the sensuous world. Accordingly, the development of different symbolic forms is the process of our common human culture. And this process leads to greater differentiation because of the sophistication of the symbolic sign structures in the variety of symbolic forms in general and specifically within the internal development of each symbolic form.

2 Historical background and present significance of Cassirer's philosophy

Cassirer developed the program of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* as a response to the philosophical climate of Germany in the beginning of the twentieth century. Contrary to many of his contemporaries, Cassirer insisted on comprehending the whole of human culture; human culture should not be pictured as a smooth unity but rather as a functional harmony of contrasts. Cassirer's standpoint must be understood against the background of the polarized debates within German, and, in general, European intellectual circles of the early and mid twentieth century. Proponents of the methods of natural science as being the only true and sane way to knowledge opposed proponents of the so-called philosophy of life building on the German tradition of *Bildung*, where speculative philosophy and poetry were cherished as the highest wisdom of human culture. This divide between "two cultures" is, from the standpoint of a philosopher of Cassirer's type, who was well-trained in both the natural sciences and the humanities, simply erroneous. According to Cassirer, both sides of the divide decrease the complexity of human culture by trying to shape it into one mold. By seeking a uniting bond between contexts of meaning as diverse as, for example, myth and modern natural science, Cassirer deliberately searched for a way to avoid accepting the subject of philosophy to be either only scientific theory (as in the philosophy of the logical positivists) or detached from the knowledge of the sciences (as in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger). Cassirer's ambition was to show how the formation of experience and culture *in toto* is a process which cannot be contained within the borders of established domains—neither the domain of science nor that of existence. In the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer aimed to demonstrate how both approaches are too simplistic in their definition of meaning. Precise knowledge of modern mathematics and physics enabled him to argue that theoretical tools (mathematics) and empirical observation (sense perception) are intricately intertwined and only by way of common sustenance produce new cognition. Cassirer also extended the validity of this scheme of the constructive process of reaching cognition of the physical world to the more common forms of meaning, as well as meaning production in language, myth, and art.

Cassirer presented a dialectic position on the relation between philosophy, science, and everyday knowledge. The sciences, everyday knowledge, and artistic expressions

are each understood as autonomous processes that develop new insights through the discord between theoretical principles and empirical experience that arises out of the setting of a particular scientific, everyday, or artistic practice. Philosophy monitors these developments. A reflective interpretation and correlation of these diverse growths of knowledge, understanding, and experience is the aim and purpose of philosophy. Thus, from one perspective Cassirer primarily identifies philosophy with the classical Greek idea of reflection. Yet from another perspective he argues that this process of reflection not only takes place in philosophy but within each symbolic form as an integral part of the inherent tensions of that symbolic form. In this manner, some degree of reflection is part and parcel of all symbolic forms and their practices. The reflective thinking of the individual or a group of practitioners creates the space within the different symbolic forms for the performance of free and open-minded decisions. In this sense, philosophy is an auxiliary mode of reflection. But the detachment of philosophy from specific symbolic forms also makes it possible for philosophical reflection to comprehend culture as a whole, in spite of its many distinctive symbolic forms. Consequently, the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* enables us to perceive diverse human undertakings as a harmony in contrariety and thus to become aware of the conflicting perspectives of culture as sustaining each other in the process of developing increasing understanding both of ourselves and the world.

The articles in this volume, we hope, will give the reader new insights into these important features of Cassirer's philosophy.

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Reference

Cassirer, E. (1944). *An essay on man*. New Haven: Yale University Press.