

History, Freedom, and Normativity in Cassirer

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Whether and to what extent Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of culture contains a normative element for the proper evaluation of symbolic forms is a central question in Cassirer interpretation¹. The answer to this question seems elusive because he never gives us an explicit discussion of the normative dimension in culture. In fact, Cassirer's treatment of the cultural sphere sometimes sounds as if the concept of culture is merely a descriptive project. However, it is clear that Cassirer at least thought a normative formulation of culture possible. It could be argued that *The Myth of the State* is a work of normative philosophy of culture that laments on these very grounds the resurgence of myth in the rise of Nazi Germany. In fact, much of Cassirer's work in the last ten years of his life has similar normative elements. In the face of a rising Fascist regime, [it](#) acknowledges the existence of a normative dimension in his philosophy of culture. This "more normative" period of Cassirer's philosophy might be said to start with the 1936 lecture titled *Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture*, where Cassirer explicitly references a normative/ethical dimension to culture. He says, "We cannot build up a philosophy of culture by mere formal and logical means. We have to face the fundamental ethical question that is contained in the very concept of culture. The philosophy of culture may be called a study of forms; but all these forms cannot be understood without relating them to a common goal" (*SMC* 81). This passage tells us two things:



¹ See TRUWANT 2015, BAYER 1993, and SCHLIPP 1951.

first, ethics cannot be a separate “form,” in the way that art or religion is a form, but must be something to which all the symbolic forms relate, and second, that a philosophy of culture cannot be completed without specifying this common goal.

In this paper, my aim is to specify the nature of this normative element. I not only assert the existence of a real normative dimension in the philosophy of culture, but also specify the nature of its main element: the concept of freedom. The concept of freedom in Cassirer is by no means an explicit facet of his systematic thought. However, this does not indicate that this is not an important part of his system. Rather, it might mean that Cassirer either thought it so basic he didn’t need to explicate it or he thought that it would be made clear through his exposition of symbolic forms. I will proceed by arguing for a “normative space” in Cassirer’s philosophy of culture. By “normative space” I mean a certain limitation to the philosophy of culture that makes room for the *free* act of the cultural agent for which she is *responsible*. In other words, by “normative space” I mean to suggest that Cassirer meant to leave room, and a prominent seat, for the normative element in the philosophy of culture. After establishing this, I will suggest that this normative task in the philosophy of culture is, from a first-person perspective, inevitably connected to the descriptive task, but from a third-person perspective, conceptually distinct. I will then move to better define what I take to be the main value of the normative task: freedom. The freedom that Cassirer defends is an *ethical* conception understood as both a constitutive norm for cultural action and a regulative ideal for the evaluation of cultural objects. Understanding freedom in this way allows us to conceive of it both as a fundamental phenomenon and an evaluative standard.

1. *The Responsibility of Culture*

Helmut Kuhn ends his review of Cassirer’s *Essay on Man* with the categorical statement, “The *Essay on Man* has no room for an ethics – no room for man confronted with the choice of

good and evil” (Kuhn 1945, 504). Kuhn suggests that Cassirer’s philosophy of culture cannot be ethical because it problematically collapses everything into an idealized creative process without a genuine agent to act or an object to act upon. Following Kuhn in this regard, it might be the case that the symbolic forms “float in an ontological vacuum” (Kuhn 1945, 503).

However, the picture of Cassirer as just unconcerned with the ethical seems to be simply false. Cassirer’s concern for the ethical can be traced back to his debate with Heidegger in Davos in 1929. The central concern of this debate was (or seemed to turn into) a debate about what Kant’s concern was in the *The Critique of Pure Reason*. This text gravitated toward the center of the debate most likely because Heidegger had just published an iconoclastic commentary on Kant, and Cassirer was stylized to be the archetype of the traditional Neo-Kantian philosophy. However, the debate over Kant is even more significant for understanding Cassirer’s general disagreement with Heidegger.² Heidegger’s provocative claim was that *The Critique of Pure Reason* was misunderstood by the Neo-Kantians as being a sort of physical epistemology. Rather, Heidegger insisted that Kant’s critical project was metaphysics as ontology. Heidegger reimagines the a-priori formal schema as an articulation of factual limits of human finite being and thus turns the transcendental synthesis into an ontological synthesis.³ Cassirer, however, against both Heidegger and the Neo-Kantians (or at least Heidegger’s characterization of them) insisted that the critical project was about specifying the possibility of ethical freedom. Kant denies that we can know our freedom in a theoretical way, however, this does not negate freedom (or ethics) *per se*. Rather, Cassirer points out that ethics transcends the finitude of theoretical man to grasp laws given in the *mundus intelligibilis*. Cassirer agrees with Heidegger that the Kantian schematism is limited: “[a]t best there is a typology, and not a schematism, of practical reason” (Hamburg 1964-1965, 214-215). But this

² See LUFT 2015.

³ See WEATHERSTON 2002, especially chapters 2-3.

rather frees the ethical from the limitations of the theoretical. Freedom is known through our intuitional insights (*Einsichten*) rather than our theoretical judgements. Thus, Cassirer insists that though Heidegger is right to emphasize the relative and limited cognitive powers, “[f]or Kant, the schematism is a *terminus a quo* and not a *terminus ad quem*. He did indeed start from the sort of problem raised by Heidegger. But he went beyond it” (*ibid.*, 215). The method for moving beyond this, in spite of the theoretical finitude of the knower, is the puzzle Kant aims to solve.

Therefore, Cassirer’s concern in this disagreement is that, in order to preserve the ethical/normative dimension in humanity, we cannot stop at human finitude and facticity. This concern persists throughout Cassirer’s career and forms the background questions in much of his later work. In *Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture*, Cassirer continues the critique of Heidegger he started in 1929. He suggests that Heidegger’s *Existentialphilosophie* could not fulfill one of the major tasks of the philosophy of culture: the reflection on the goal and meaning of cultural manifestations. The problem is that *Existentialphilosophie* cannot answer the question of human existence fully because “[t]he problem of the existence of man is not only a problem of objective Being, but of objective value” – with the latter going beyond mere human facticity. Thus, the question of the philosophy of culture cannot be understood without addressing and attempting to answer this “ethical problem of culture.” (*SMC* 81-82). Hence, agree with John M. Krois’ comment on the disagreement between Cassirer and Heidegger regarding duty:

Cassirer’s basic criticism of Heidegger stems from this basic difference; he regards Heidegger’s philosophy to lead from an emphasis on destiny to an ethical impasse: “a philosophy whose whole attention is focused on the *Geworfenheit*, the Being-thrown of man, can no longer do its duty.” (*SMC* 230) This duty is to show how man can help himself by acting as a guardian of the values of human culture in the sense of ideals or standards of natural law, and most of all, to foster ethical self-responsibility as it is expressed in independent ethical decisions (Krois 1983, 155).

Thus, the particular duty of humankind is threatened by philosophies that emphasize destiny and fate. In the 1944 essay *Philosophy and Politics*, Cassirer again opposes the philosophy of history laid out by Heidegger and Spengler with the aid of the philosophy of history and culture of Albert Schweitzer., which he construes in sharp contrast to Heidegger and Spengler’s fatalistic metaphysics.

Cassirer had met Schweitzer at Oxford in 1934. He admitted being influenced by Schweitzer’s work and even sent him a letter expressing agreement with Schweitzer’s philosophical and ethical positions.⁴ Therefore, it is worth looking more closely at Schweitzer as a trustworthy reflection of Cassirer’s ethical concerns. In 1924, Schweitzer published two essays, *Verfall und Wiederaufbau der Kultur* and *Kultur und Ethik*, which proved impressively far-sighted, already sensing the challenge that European culture would face in the coming years.⁵ In these essays, Schweitzer lamented the collapse of civilization that had started to overtake Europe. In order to defend against this troubling trend, Schweitzer insisted that we erect a philosophy of culture that might first reflect upon the collapse and its origins, and second, find a way to restore civilization to its proper place. In *Verfall und Wiederaufbau der Kultur*, Schweitzer argues that the collapse of culture was caused by the lack of “real reflection” among the citizens and philosophers alike about what civilization actually is (Schweitzer 1987, 1). I take the notion of “real” reflection to mean a sufficiently philosophical one. This does not, of course, mean that this reflection is necessarily taken up by philosophers, but simply that the reflection adheres to some basic qualitative criterion to be genuine. Furthermore, Schweitzer connects the task of philosophical reflection to the safeguarding and advance of civilization and culture. Even though, he admits, “ethical ideas were no longer supported by any general theory of the universe”, we must take its “own innate power” as its justification. (3-4) Reflection of this sort both

⁴ GÜNZLER 1995, 313.

⁵ I cite here the English translation, Schweitzer 1987.

establishes and maintains those values on which our civilization rests. Philosophy thus enriches and protects the ideals that form the pillars of civilization itself. In Schweitzer's lifetime, the failure of civilization has come about because "philosophy philosophized about everything *except* civilization" (8, emphasis mine). Philosophy had abandoned its role of protecting and enriching those foundations of civilization. In no shortage of dramatic flair, Schweitzer exclaims, "[i]n the hour of peril the watchman who ought to have kept us awake was himself asleep, and the result was that we put up no fight at all on behalf of our civilization." (8).

Thus, Schweitzer looks at the advance of cultural history as a task that we are responsible for, one that is the result of free decisions of individual cultural actors. This Cassirer contrasts sharply with the "dangerous" formulations that Heidegger and Spengler identify in cultural history as a result of "fate." According to Cassirer's endorsement of Schweitzer's views of culture and history against fatalistic notions, the task of philosophical reflection on cultural formations is then to preserve the concept of civilization, and historical creation, as an act done by free persons. This also has the implication of suggesting that we are responsible – i.e. that we can be judged – for the sort of civilization we bring about.

Cassirer's considerations on history and civilization are not confined to this essay or to his endorsement of Schweitzer. He elaborates further his own views in *Naturalistische und humanistische Begründung der Kulturphilosophie*, written in 1939.⁶ Here he attacks all deterministic concepts of culture and history that would attempt to undermine the notion of cultural history as a result of *individual free action*. Cassirer specifies two sorts of deterministic notions of history that must be rejected: the naturalistic conceptions in Spencer and Taine⁷, and metaphys-

ically deterministic notions like those of Hegel and Spengler.⁸ Spencer and Taine want to suggest that because cultural and historical events can be reduced to naturalistic causes and effects, historical events are the result of natural forces interacting to determine some state of affairs. Such a naturalistic reduction misses the place of individual free action in the construction of historical events and cultural states. The same is true of the metaphysically deterministic account of Hegel and Spengler: if historical progress is determined by some metaphysical absolute, then the individual is threatened to disappear into this same abyss. Cassirer repudiates these views in favor of what he calls a "humanistic" or "critical view of cultural history." (*NHBK*, 156-157 [26-27]) This view opens up the (normative) space for human agency and freedom in shaping human culture, and thus for ethical responsibility. When we return from the "speculative optimism of the Hegelian view of history... human action again has the opportunity to determine itself by its own power and through its own answers, knowing full well that the direction and future of civilization are dependent upon this kind of determination" (*NHBK*, 166 [37]). The main task of culture, in accord with Schweitzer's warning, is to watch over and *preserve* the free creative power of the individual human being. This is also done by accepting limits *within* the philosophy of culture.

The continually erupting anxiety over the destiny and future of human civilization can hardly be prevented by a critical philosophy of culture. It, too, must recognize this barrier to historical determinism or prediction. All that can be said on this score is that culture will advance just to the extent that the truly creative powers, which in the final analysis are only brought into play by our own efforts, are not forsaken or crippled (*NHBK* 166 [37]).

Cassirer insists that the preservation of these creative powers is connected to the preservation of the freedom of the individual. This is why Hegel's view of history and culture cannot be

⁶ This essay was translated and printed as an introduction to the 1961 edition of *The Logic of the Humanities*. Here I cite first the *Gesammelte Werke* and then the English translation in the 1961 edition.

⁷ See SPENCER 1862 and TAINÉ 1945.

⁸ See HEGEL 2018, 13-15 and Spengler 1927.

acceptable by Cassirer's standards, indeed, it must even "present a diametrically opposite interpretation." Though Hegel insists that his philosophy is a philosophy of freedom, Hegel's freedom is a metaphysical one. It attributes the process of freedom only to the Infinite, to the Absolute Subject, rather to the finite individual. The individual is nothing but a moment in the world event, a "means by which the World Spirit utilizes to its own end" (*NHBK* 151 [18]). This turns the individual as the actual author of her act into a mere illusion. A "Reason" only considered in the "Absolute" must thus override the individuality of finite subjects. This "[a]bsolute reason utilizes the particular goals and passions of individuals, though not for the sake of these individuals, but as her own." The individual becomes "a mere marionette of the omnipotent, self-moving Idea" (*NHBK* 152 [19]).

For Cassirer, the individual is not simply identical with empirical individuals. The individual is, while remaining distinctly herself, identified with the universal. Cassirer states, "All historical life is nationally conditioned and limited; but in this very conditioning, indeed, by virtue of it, it exemplifies the universality, the unbroken oneness, of the human race" (*NHBK* 157 [25]). The historical individual remains firmly in her finiteness and facticity. However, she has, innately, the power to transcend her facticity through the creative power of cultural symbolization: the power to create and direct history and culture. Such freedom, Cassirer argues further, does not entail our independence from our nature. "Organic limits," which are fixed for us just as for any other living thing, are still operative in us. However, "within these limits, indeed by means of them," we fashion "a breadth and self-sufficiency of movement which is accessible and attainable only by" us. Through the acknowledgement of the limitations of our nature, and therefore the acknowledgement of our finitude, we can have our freedom. Freedom here means a consciousness of limits, and only "[h]ere the Hegelian statement holds good—that he who knows about a limitation is already free of it". This becoming aware is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega, as Cassirer would surely say, of human freedom. Knowing and

taking account of necessity is the genuine process of liberation which 'spirit' – in contradistinction to 'nature' – has brought to perfection (*LKW* 381 [25]). The possibility of transcending facticity through the activity of symbolization as a process of liberation is what Cassirer wanted to emphasize in his debate with Heidegger. In *An Essay on Man*, Cassirer famously characterizes culture as a process of self-liberation (*EM* 244). He suggests that the various symbolic forms are the "true media" through which man is able to separate himself from the world, transcending his own facticity. It might be said that the medium of culture is *only* true because it *communicates to the cultural actor something true about herself, namely the possibility of her own freedom*.

With this, Cassirer emphasizes the importance and formulates the space for human agency and human freedom in his philosophy of culture. Grasping this free creative agency is necessary to understanding culture itself. The concept of human freedom is not simply an extrinsic addition to the philosophy of culture, but rather lies at the heart of Cassirer's characterization of the *animal symbolicum* as being defined by the free creative act. Thus, there is an ethical concept of freedom that sits not wholly within, but also not quite separate from the world of culture.

In the next section I will attempt to show two things: first, I will sketch a picture of the relationship between value and the descriptive task of Cassirer's philosophy of culture. Second, I will show why Cassirer insists that the normative or evaluative task takes as its highest value the notion of human freedom. Therefore, we will conclude that cultural symbolizations, according to Cassirer, are to be evaluated by the value of freedom. In the last section, I will turn more directly to the concept of freedom and ask about its precise nature. The function of my question will be to ask to what extent the freedom that Cassirer advocates is a genuinely normative or ethical concept. I will do this by insisting that Cassirer adopts freedom as not only a constitutive norm of cultural action but also a regulative ideal of the cultural world.

2. *Culture and Value*

In the *Logic of the Humanities*, Cassirer states the two tasks of the philosophy of culture in the following way: “When philosophy remained mindful of its essential and supreme task, when it was determined to be not only a certain kind of *knowledge* [*Wissens*] of the world but also the *conscience* [*Gewissen*] of human culture [...]” (ZLK 383 [27]). Cassirer seems to be aware of the difference between the two tasks, i.e. between the descriptive and normative function of the philosophy of culture. He acknowledges that a philosophy of culture does indeed consist of both the pursuit of knowledge and the evaluation of different cultural forms. What is at stake in this section is to define the relative distinctness and relation of these two tasks. It seems that Cassirer insists that the two tasks must be kept distinct. However, he himself often does not stick to this rule as he occasionally conflates what seem to be descriptive investigations with normative evaluations. For example, regarding the various symbolic forms, he on the one hand speaks of them as being equally possible styles of experience unbound by any evolutionary scale, and on the other hand, especially in his later writings, regards science as a better and more evolved symbolic form in contradistinction to myth in particular. Many have raised this ambiguity as an issue.⁹ However, while I will not give a full account of the relations of the symbolic forms to each other, I will attempt to insist, as Cassirer did, on the conceptual distinction between the two tasks: descriptive and evaluative. I also hope that this might lessen the danger of the aforementioned ambiguity.

In the context of addressing the difference between concepts in cultural science and concepts in natural science, Cassirer brings up the concept categories proposed by Windelband and Rickert.¹⁰ They suggest that in order to grasp the material of the historical world, we must come to it with a set of value-con-

cepts.¹¹ Cassirer objects to the notion of value concepts because they conflate the “is” and “ought” distinction (ZLK 393-394 [35-37]). Value-concepts, as Windelband and Rickert suggest them, problematically confuse the descriptive task of the historian and the value-conferring role of the philosopher. Cassirer does not deny the importance of value-concepts, but holds that, “[i]f the possession of a universal system of values turns out to be one of these conditions, the question arises as to how the historian can arrive at such a system and how he would establish its objective validity” (ZLK 394 [37]). This is not to say that Cassirer is calling into question the possibility of the objective validity of value-concepts in general, but rather that he questions how the *historian* could possibly establish such values. She could establish values on history itself, but this is a circular argument, since if she established values *through* the historical world, she would no longer be allowed on pain of circularity to *explicate* the historical world through these values. The second possibility is one of an *a priori* construction of value-concepts which are then applied to the historical world. But this cannot be done without making metaphysical assumptions which again provoke the question the historian set out to answer. These are the “Scylla of naturalism and the Charybdis of metaphysics” that a critical philosophy of culture seeks to traverse (LKW 407 [50]). A critical philosophy of culture is concerned with avoiding these two extremes by suggesting some formal unity in cultural (spiritual) work itself.

Cassirer suggest that we should use the notion of “style-concepts” to characterize the different symbolic forms which avoid this conflation.

There exists a fundamental difference between style concepts and value concepts. What the concepts of style represent is not an ought but a pure “being” – even though this being is concerned not with physical things but with the existence of “forms”. When I speak of the “form” of a language, or of a certain art form, in itself this has nothing to do with a value reference. Certain value judgments can be *linked* to

⁹ See, for instance, LUFT 2015, 198ff; KROIS 1987, 173-175; HABERMAS 2001, 19-23

¹⁰ For a fuller description of Cassirer’s relation to Windelband and Rickert see KROIS 2010.

¹¹ See RICKERT 1923 and WINDELBAND 1911.

the establishment of such forms, but they are not constitutive for the grasping of the form as such, for its meaning and specification. (LKW 421 [63]).

This passage suggests that the inquiry into cultural forms can, and must, be separated from the possibility of ranking the cultural forms in some hierarchy. Against the insistence of Rickert, Cassirer thinks that cultural inquiry does not require the formulation or application of a system of values. Thus, the “spiritual unity” that according to Cassirer gives form to certain cultural-concepts cannot yet be a value. Cassirer suggests that the point of his cultural concepts is to distinguish their logical form from both nature and value concepts. Thus, Cassirer insists that we must maintain the is/ought distinction. Not only are these separate movements in the philosophy of culture, but a merely structural investigation might precede any possibility of evaluative judgement. Cassirer suggests that though Humboldt surely made evaluative judgments throughout his investigation of languages, he was clearly only able to be evaluative after the structural investigation was complete (LKW 421 [63]).

Despite this methodological distinctness, Cassirer seems to be committed to some significant connection between the two realms. As Oswald Schwemmer observes, in the very act of culture, i.e. the realization of the cultural work (*Werk*) brought into being by the act of symbolic creativity, hides an exercise of freedom that gives symbolization an ethical dimension. Schwemmer calls this dimension of symbolic creativity the “moral impulse.” (Schwemmer 1997b, 174). Therefore, any study of culture involves an ethical dimension, namely the normative moment of symbolization. And the study of ethics involves in it the cultural works (*Werke*) in which these ethical norms are expressed and objectified. (Schwemmer 1997b, 177-182). This might be understood with reference to the pragmatic normativity expressed most forcefully in Robert Brandom’s *Making it Explicit*.¹² Brandom suggests that we cannot understand our actions unless we understand the implicit *normative*

dimension in the action. In every interaction, we necessarily express certain commitments. That is, in every expression we *take up* responsibility for the expression (Brandom 1994, 30-45). Taken from the third-person perspective, we might also ask whether the person is entitled to her commitments based on some prior commitment. In our social interactions with one another, we interact by committing to our expressions, and we are to be reasonably judged for that commitment. Otherwise, the network of giving and asking for reasons, and hence social interaction, cannot be established. This is the inescapable ethical/normative dimension in any cultural expression. Therefore, it is clear that, for Cassirer, the normative element is always already within the act of cultural expression in that it must be addressed to someone by someone.

Yet we must notice that this interconnectedness does not contradict Cassirer’s prior insistence on the distinctness of the normative and descriptive tasks¹³. While it is a fact that the normative element is always already an element in symbolic action, this does not mean that the cultural *object* cannot be known simply by its form nor be evaluated by the connection to some normative judgement. In other words, there is a combination of the two tasks at the moment of the symbolic *action*, but then these are separated again when considering the cultural *object*. This distinction could be understood as the distinction between first-person and third-person perspectives. From the first-person view, which is the view of the cultural agent, the normative and descriptive element collapse because the symbolic creation involves both free choice and normative commitment of the agent. However, from the third-person view, the symbolic creation can be considered merely descriptively, with reference to its internal form, or connected to some value or normative judgement, but it need not have both. Take, for example, an experience I recently had at the ruins of a temple to the ancient goddess Isis. Walking through these ruins, it is clear that for the religious practitioners who built this temple and created intricate

¹² I would like to thank Anne Pollok for making this connection clear for me.

¹³ See SCHWEMMER 1997.

rituals performed inside, their creative act is an acknowledgment of normative commitments and entitlements. The creative act, by the very act, committed these ancient peoples to certain normative claims about the world and entitled them to certain conclusions. However, when I walk through the temple and touch the ancient stone and gaze blankly at delicately preserved fertility amulets, I have two options. I might talk to whomever I have dragged there with me about the composition and style of the temple, or the affinity of the small amulets to some we had seen from West African cultures. This can all be done without the slightest need to inquire about the way fertility rituals problematically exploited women as objects for reproduction, or whether the temple's claim to provide these rituals for money perpetuated ethically problematic power-relations between clergy and non-clergy. These are important inquiries, but here we are engaging in the normative task instead of the descriptive task – and we might switch between these two according to our purposes.

I want to emphasize again that the above acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of any description of cultural action and the normative element does not immediately contradict Cassirer's insistence that the two tasks are not necessarily connected. These two aspects of the philosophy of culture are always seen together when considering the first-person perspective of cultural work creation. But, seen from the perspective of the observer (for instance, the cultural philosopher and scientist), we can conceive of these tasks as separate inquiries, one into the internal logical form of the work and the other into the normative rightness or appropriateness of the work. With the consideration of both these perspectives, Cassirer's formulation of the I-You-Work connection is filled out. This is a triangular formulation where the different relations can be emphasized separately. The consideration of the connection between the "I" and "Work" gives us the first-person view referred to above. The relation between "You" and the "Work" gives us the third-person descriptive aspect, and the relation between the "I" and "You" yields the third-person normative aspect. Of

course any of these emphases cannot leave behind the respective third part of the triangular formulation. For instance, in the third-person normative aspect of "I" and "You", the work forms the background through which we know and evaluate the "I"; the "I" is known through the investigation of the work¹⁴. This formulation allows us to make sense of the ways in which the normative and descriptive elements can be seen as distinct tasks and also as deeply intertwined. The difference between perspectives is one of emphasis. Thus, in spite of the connection between the two tasks, it is possible that we can separate our cultural inquiries into a normative and descriptive task.

Still in question is the normative judgment, or the *evaluation* of the normative nature of symbolic creativity; we still must ask what norms and values ought we use to evaluate works of culture. In trying to work out the difficult connection between culture and ethical evaluation, Cassirer refers to Kant's reflections on history in the latter's *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1784), and endorses the ultimate value proposed in it for morally judging history, namely freedom. Cassirer follows Kant in suggesting that freedom means the "autonomy of reason," and therefore, "the universal aim of a philosophy of culture is...contained in the question in which way and by what means this autonomy may be reached in the evolution of human thought and human will" (*SMC* 85). The whole theme of human history and culture is contained in the progressive actualization of the demand of the autonomy of reason. Here Cassirer suggests that the value of freedom, understood as the autonomy of reason, is the value by which cultural forms ought to be evaluated. In other words, the normative task of the philosophy of culture takes freedom as its central norm or value.

However, a problem still remains. What is the nature of this freedom? It is clear that Cassirer sees it as central to a philoso-

¹⁴ See POLLOK 2015. Here Pollok gives a similar account of the different perspectives in history but does not make this tripartite relationship explicit nor applies it fully to the notion of normativity.

phy of culture, but what is its relation to the descriptive task in the philosophy of culture and in what sense is it a *normative* concept? This question must be asked because while it is clear that the Kantian idea of freedom plays a central role in Cassirer's idea of freedom, Cassirer also adopts terminological and conceptual tools from the Hegelian system.¹⁵ So the question is whether and to what extent Cassirer's idea of freedom is Kantian or Hegelian. This becomes problematic when we seek to find the specific *normative* element. One might, and I think one should, worry about the adoption of a Hegelian notion of freedom that contradicts all the heroic statements about human freedom and responsibility quoted above. In other words, if Cassirer, despite his statements, accepts a notion of freedom that is simply active *through* human beings in their actions, then it is unclear how the notion of freedom can be a normative value for culture. In the following section, I will suggest that though Cassirer's understanding of freedom is not strictly Kantian or Hegelian, we ought to understand freedom as both constitutive of creative cultural action but also regulative of cultural works themselves. This explains how freedom can be operative in both the descriptive and normative tasks.

3. *Hegelian or Kantian Freedom?*

Cassirer takes the Kantian notion of freedom as the starting point for his own idea of freedom. As we saw above, Cassirer admires Kant's commitment to freedom in history and civilization. However, Cassirer is also suspicious of certain aspects of the Kantian conception of freedom. For instance, Cassirer sees the need to go beyond the spheres that Kant explicates to include all possible objectifications of the human spirit and to avoid the impasses of subjectivism and psychologism. For this reason,

¹⁵ The most obvious example of this is in the preface to the third volume of *PSF* where Cassirer adopts the Hegelian notion of "phenomenology" (viii-ix) and his situation of myth within the framework of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* in volume two of *PSF* (x-xii). Furthermore, Cassirer speaks about going beyond the ideas of Kant in *PSF* III, 6-11 and *PSF* II, 9-11. See also VERENE 2011 and HOSGÖR 2016.



he follows Hegel's move in applying this reflection on freedom beyond what Hegel called Kant's "subjective mind" or "subjective consciousness". Cassirer suggests that "freedom is no mere fact of consciousness that must be believed on the testimony of the consciousness, it is to be made and acquired and it cannot be acquired but by the work of the mind's self-realization" (*SMC* 88). This critique of the Kantian idea of the subjective self-evidence of freedom as a "fact of consciousness" releases freedom from the *mind* of the individual and into the various diverse creative *acts* of individuals. Freedom considered this way explains the relationship of such a fact of consciousness to the various forms of culture: freedom is known through them and manifested by them. This is indeed what appealed to Cassirer in Hegel's phenomenology: the exploration of the most varied spheres and fields of culture in search of patterns and structures. Hegel's expansion of the field of inquiry out of the subjective mind into the cultural world connected, for Cassirer, the task of self-realization with the study of culture. Yet, as we have seen, Cassirer rejects the deterministic-teleological view of human cultural history. As such, Cassirer could not adhere to a view of history that could undermine human responsibility. Thus, Cassirer also rejected what he called Hegel's substantialist view of freedom, which understands freedom as a metaphysical entity working in history through human beings and giving only an illusion of individual freedom. Cassirer rejects that freedom can be conceived in this metaphysical way, in that freedom is not something apart from the persons who perform it. Cassirer, rather, sees himself as a critical idealist and thus committed to an *ethical* idea of freedom. Critical idealism claims a "more modest task than the absolute idealism of Hegel" (*SMC* 89-90). It contains a "critical reserve" which prevents it from explicating culture in a way that develops from an "absolute nature and substance of mind." This does not mean that a critical philosophy of culture does not have some unify form or origin. However,

[w]e cannot define and we cannot explain this unity – neither in terms of metaphysics nor in the way of a naturalistic and fatalistic system of history. For it is not a given thing; it is an idea and an ideal. It must be understood in a dynamic sense, instead of conceiving it in a static sense. It must be produced, and in this production consists the essential meaning of culture and its ethical value. (SMC 90).

These statements by Cassirer show us two things. First, the mere descriptive exploration of the cultural manifestations of a human community is not by itself sufficient for ethically evaluating those manifestations. This would require a further type of exercise, namely the normative judgment as such. Second, since freedom is to be acquired by the work of the mind's self-realization in the different forms of culture, and, since this work and freedom are not metaphysical givens but ethical tasks, then the major concern in the normative dimension of the philosophy of culture would be to safeguard the creative powers necessary for culture, so that they cannot be forsaken or crippled. This is the role of the "watchman" that Schweitzer assigns to philosophy in general and to philosophy of culture in particular. In an essay written as a tribute to Schweitzer, Cassirer further explains his notion of freedom, which he connects directly to Kantian notions of the autonomy of reason. Cassirer identifies Schweitzer as the heir of such notions and as a main critic of the nineteenth century conception, (which Cassirer and Schweitzer believe betrayed this notion). Cassirer's explanation shows that what he understands as the "autonomy of reason" is critical thinking, possible only for the free individual, free from control and problematic "collective thought". It is reason understood as an ethical principle. He opposes this again to Hegel's notion of reason. "In Hegel's system 'reason' means a metaphysical, not an ethical principle. It is a substantial power which does its work and performs its task regardless of the thought, the wishes, the demands, or actions of the individual men." What is most problematic for Cassirer is that this implies that "[t]he individuals are not the real agents^[16]" (*Albert Schweitzer as Cri-*

tic of Nineteenth-Century Ethics, ECW 24, 321-334, here 329). In his account on an idea of reason, Cassirer thus emphasizes the role of the "real agents" which he understands as concrete individuals rather than some metaphysical subject. The ethical consideration of culture necessitates the consideration of actual concrete individuals and their demands and actions. Reason is something manifest in the world of human agents that act for various reasons. Although Cassirer welcomes Hegel's invitation to go beyond Kant's supposedly subjective sphere for the study of the workings of freedom in the various objectifications of the human mind, he rejects vehemently his placing of freedom and reason in some metaphysical objective entity existing and operating independently of individual human beings. Cassirer suggests that in Hegel's philosophy, reason's "true manifestations" are found in the "objective mind" (*ibid.*, 328-330). Thus, the Hegelian system, regardless of its merits, problematically collapses the realms of reason and reality. Reason, as Hegel famously puts it, is what *is*.¹⁷ Following Schweitzer, Cassirer rather emphasizes the tension between, not the identification of, reason and reality in such a holistic and metaphysical conception of freedom and reason. Both he and Schweitzer follow Kant instead by accepting the principle of the primacy of practical reason, which ~~necessitates to maintain~~ the dualism between reason and reality.


This makes freedom (the autonomy of reason) not a metaphysical reality but an ethical task. The idea of freedom is taken *back* from the Hegelian notion of idea as "absolute power" to the Kantian idea as "infinite problem" that finds expression in cultural forms – Cassirer, however, has clarified the mechanics by which this freedom is exercised. Thus, human action has the opportunity "to determine itself by its own power through its own answers, knowing full well that the direction and future of civilization are dependent upon this kind of determination" (*NHBK* 166 [38]). My suggestion is that this insistence on the Kantian point over the Hegelian when it co-

¹⁶ Cassirer erroneously refers to agents as "actors".

¹⁷ See HEGEL 1967, 11 and HEGEL 1975, 9-10.

mes to freedom and reason means that Cassirer adopts freedom and reason as values for the normative task of culture in their specific Kantian iterations. These are freedom as autonomy of reason and reason as critical thinking. These are strongly defined against the Hegelian notions, in spite of Cassirer's insistence that we must apply the idea of freedom outside of subjective consciousness into the cultural world. This expansion is only in the places in which these values are explored and used. Freedom and reason become not simply psychological notions or metaphysical entities, but things known, grasped, and expanded by the act of cultural creation.

Therefore, I suggest that we understand the values of freedom and reason as both constitutive norms of any cultural action and regulative ideals that guide our cultural formations. By "constitutive" I mean that freedom is a necessary component and organizing power of cultural formations such that the symbolic act is always also, in this basic sense, a free act. Freedom is constitutive of cultural action because, as we have seen, we must make room for the freedom of the cultural agent in order to have a philosophy of culture at all. The ethical values of freedom and reason also serve as regulative ideals by which existing cultural formations are judged and through which we ought to orient ourselves in future cultural formations. Freedom becomes regulative when we attach our normative judgment to some cultural act – when we consider the cultural form in relation to some value. This is done through the cultural form's ability to express or maintain the cultural agent's freedom. This means that freedom considered as a regulative ideal is the judgment of the cultural form in relation to the relative freedom and autonomy of the cultural agent(s) whose freedom it is supposed to express. Cassirer himself engaged in projects like this when he, for example, criticized certain cultural formations and the resurgence of myth in *The Myth of the State*. Cassirer here continuously explains his fears about fascism and other forms of political myths in an age of technology and collective thought. He worries about the resurgence of the mythic specifically because it threatens the ability of people to think

and act freely. Mythic symbolization, created by media and political interests, manipulates the individual to the point where she is unable to respond critically to the world. These artificial myths, which are themselves free acts of cultural agents, paralyze others by their feigned necessity into cultural stagnation. The regulative ideals of freedom and reason are here operative in Cassirer's condemnation of these cultural formations. These formulations can be judged as ethically problematic because they fail to properly express, promote, and maintain freedom and reason. Indeed, he saw many of these things as manifestations of the fatalistic philosophy of history and holistic metaphysics that he had sought to defend against, both for his own sake and the for the sake of safeguarding freedom. 

Freedom, taken in the Kantian form, is an infinite problem, a task to be taken up, a task we are responsible for. This means that cultural formation, because it is born of freedom and seeks freedom, takes the freedom of the cultural agent as the main normative value guiding legitimate cultural formations. This also means that freedom is something that is known and achieved only through cultural action itself. Thus, it is expressed in the cultural action. We cannot know freedom except through its expression to us in culture.

The task of freedom involves both its constitutive and regulative elements. Indeed, because freedom must involve both these things it will continue to be a problem that we must work out. Cultural actions are always redefining the cultural commitments and entitlements by which we would judge a certain cultural action. Thus, the regulative ideal is not some set, static noumenon. Rather, it is an ideal that is continuously created, challenged, and formed by our own free actions. This is because the expression and promotion of freedom and reason is one that is reliant on the continuous, active attempt to do so, and only comes into existence in the aforementioned triangle of I-You-Work. Thus, the task of freeing ourselves never ends, and indeed, it must not end, for we are always redefining, and must

always redefine, the standard by which we call ourselves free.¹⁸ It is true that Cassirer does not undertake a critical examination of these Kantian values of freedom and reason, nor does he elaborate an ultimately justificatory grounding of these ideals. Cassirer might have chosen not to go down this path for two reasons. First, he might have simply naively accepted these values. But I hesitate to assign naiveté to a thinker like Cassirer. I imagine that if these values are as central as I claim, Cassirer thought that they were justifiable in some sense. The second and more promising possibility, is that Cassirer understood his project as an expansion of the Kantian critical project and thus accepted most of the conclusions of that moral system. I will not argue for this here, but suffice to say that if Cassirer saw his project as a carrying out of the critical project into domains Kant did not deem relevant, then it seems that Cassirer himself could reasonably accept the values of freedom and reason, in their Kantian modes, as the basis of any normative task of culture. This does not, of course, solve the problem of why *these* values shall be preserved, but it does offer a reason why Cassirer thought these values to be an organic part of his philosophy of culture.

4. Conclusion

What I have argued specifies not only the existence but also the nature of the normative task of Cassirer's philosophy of culture. I have suggested that the normative element in Cassirer's philosophy of culture can be identified by making what I have called "normative space" in Cassirer's philosophy. By explicating

this normative space through our consideration of Cassirer's philosophy of history, we have seen that Cassirer was committed to the normative element in his philosophy of culture. Furthermore, he seems to have been committed to the separation of the descriptive and normative tasks in the philosophy of culture despite their deep connectedness in the act of symbolic expression and his apparent conflation of the two tasks in his own work. The normative task is to evaluate certain symbolic actions or objects according to certain values. The value that defines the normative task for Cassirer is the value of freedom, understood as the autonomy of reason. We saw in the last section that Cassirer insists that though this concept of freedom is extended out of the subjective mind into the cultural world, it is never collapsed into the cultural world and maintains its *Kantian* connotation.

Therefore, my argument attempted to specify the existence and nature of the normative philosophy of culture. According to this, we can begin to specify the nature of Cassirer's commitment to ethical evaluation of our cultural forms and the centrality of an ethical notion of freedom in the philosophy of culture. By understanding freedom as both constitutive and regulative, we can see how Cassirer's notion of freedom can capture both the assumption of freedom in cultural action and the ideal by which we judge certain cultural forms. Both of these elements make up what it is for freedom to be a task. Not only is freedom a task of the philosophy of culture – it is *the* task. The philosophy of culture, by reflection on and exercise of our symbolic actions, is then indeed the medium of our self-liberation. Culture becomes that by which we know, secure, and pursue a fuller version of our freedom and of ourselves.

¹⁸ Here I must reference again Luft's study. In the conclusion he addresses the ethical task in Cassirer and rightfully attempts to place Cassirer's notion of freedom between Kantian and Hegelian notions. However, I believe that he misses the sense in which Cassirer's task of freedom must never end in some absolutist teleology, even if not a Hegelian metaphysical one. The task of freedom is not one we accomplish; it is not one we "finish" in the sense that we "finish" the task of watering the garden. The task of freedom is the very thing that makes us human, and to finish this task would be to cease to be human and become Hegelian gods. See LUFT 2015, 228-231.

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